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CANYON DAVE, THE MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN; Or, THE TOUGHS OF SILVER SPUR.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,
AUTHOR OF "CACTUS JACK," "DON SOMBRERO," "LADY JAGUAR," ETC., ETC.



GREATLY ASTONISHED, CANYON DAVE ADVANCED AND SAW THE BUBBLING WATER, AND, AS THOUGH FLOATING ON THE SURFACE, THREE HUMAN HEADS.

Canyon Dave,

THE MAN of the MOUNTAIN;

OR,

The Toughest of Silver Spur.

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CHAPTER I.

FACING DEATH.

It was a dangerous experiment, but the man was not one to hesitate on that account. The goat lay near the edge of a shelf of rock, a little down the face of the precipice, stone dead from the moment the bullet had touched him, and the hunter did not like to give up his prize.

He placed his rifle on the ground, and, lying down at the edge of the precipice, held fast to some creeping vines with one hand and reached over for the goat with the other.

He did not touch it, but he could get just near enough to tantalize him, and he grew more in earnest.

"The critter is mine, and, by the Lord, I'm going to have him!" he declared aloud.

It was a dangerous thing to attempt, for if he once lost his balance and fell he would go whirling down for a hundred feet, to meet sure death at the bottom of the gulch; but Otis Sprague had seen life in the Sierra Nevada too many years in succession to care for the danger.

He did not intend to lose the spoils of his rifle.

Bending still further over the edge of the rock, he reached for the mountain goat; and then he felt a thrill of triumph as his fingers closed around one leg.

Just at that moment, however, his flannel shirt slipped on the rocks, Sprague started in alarm, a little piece of the verge gave way, and then, after several wild unavailing efforts to save himself, the miner went down.

Certain death seemed to await him; but by one of those curious chances which often occur, but which we scarcely realize in actual experience and look upon as impossibilities when read of in a work of fiction, he did not make all of that terrible journey to the rocky bottom far below.

Instead, he struck upon the shelf where lay the goat, dislodging that quadruped, and then, barely checked by the circumstance, began sliding over himself.

Wildly he flung out his hands hoping to grasp something which would yet save him, but the projection of rock he seized crumbled in his hand and he slipped steadily on, his agony prolonged by the support he managed to secure by his elbows upon the shelf of stone.

Suddenly he became stationary, though greatly to his surprise. He had no hold with his hands—what had stopped him?

A downward glance answered the question. The belt which encircled his waist had caught on a point of rock, and there he hung by that slender thing, poised between life and death.

He had met adventures before in his five years' experience as hunter and miner, and as he realized that a little period of grace was vouchsafed him, he tried to think coolly.

He was in a bad fix, and he did not exactly see how he was to get out of it alive. He was only a few feet below the top of the cliff, but there was not a thing to which he could hold while climbing upward. With the exception of a few very small and brittle projections, the wall in front of him was perfectly smooth.

Clearly, he could not gain the top without aid, and the chances of a human being appearing just then were very few.

Three miles away was the mining town of Silver Spur, but every inhabitant thereof, excepting himself, was at that moment digging gold near the village, and strangers were not in the habit of roaming about the higher hills.

Still, something must be done. He could not hang there permanently, for two reasons, the most impressive of which was the fact that his belt, though doing good service up to the present time, must sooner or later give way and let him down.

Ay, even then he could see little brown streaks along the blackened surface which told that it was slowly tearing apart under the pressure.

He had been reprieved by a lucky chance, but the danger was still imminent.

Once he looked downward, but the sight of the pointed rock a hundred feet below caused him to change his gaze quickly. A fall meant certain death.

Hopeless as it appeared, he began to call for aid.

"Help! help! help!"

Strange and hollow his voice sounded in the canyon, and the echo which came back seemed to mock his distress, but Otis Sprague was not an imaginative man.

He continued to shout, all the while watch-

ing the rock's edge above, hoping to see a human face, but none appeared.

Here he looked down to his belt again. Merciful heaven! the brown lines along the surface were growing wider—the belt was tearing apart.

Even his cool heart began to throb loudly. Death in such a form was something unusually dreadful, and he put all his power of lung into the oft-repeated cry for help.

It was a wild scene, and, though not so very strange for that part of California, one which seemed destined to end in a tragedy; but fate willed it that Otis Sprague was not to die that day.

A lump of dirt suddenly fell upon the little shelf of rock in front of him, and he looked up quickly, wildly, but scarcely hopefully.

What he saw brought a sudden glow to his face. At the very verge stood a young man who, holding a rifle in one hand, was looking down at him in a surprised way.

"Help! help!" repeated Sprague, this time almost in a whisper, for he began to realize that he was growing weak.

"Hello! what the dickens are you doing there?" asked the stranger, coolly. "Ain't climbing the cliff on a wager, are you?"

"For Heaven's sake, give me help!" said Sprague, who was not in a mood to relish a joke. "I am slipping from this rock, and a fall means certain death!"

"In that case I had better chip in," admitted the new-comer. "What can I do, though? I haven't a rope, or anything of that kind."

"Hold down the biggest end of your gun. If you can hold it steady, I will go up it all right."

"You can rely on the connecting link, so far as I am concerned. Here goes!"

The stranger thrust down the breech of his rifle, and holding fast to it with one hand, gripped a bush which grew near the edge as tenaciously with the other.

Sprague moved at once. He grasped the gun and then with great care raised himself upon the ledge. His belt and the point of rock had readily separated, and with his feet on the ledge he grasped the rescuer's hand and was drawn to firm land.

Once there he found himself as weak as a woman. He lay down flat on the ground, and covering his face, remained for several moments still and silent.

The stranger saw that he was trembling like a leaf, and plainly perceiving that he was a veteran mountaineer, did not think of smiling at his actions. Instead, he finally remembered that he had a flask of whisky in his pocket, and he produced it just as Sprague raised his head.

The invitation to drink was not refused. Then the latter rose and held out his hand.

"Pard," he said, "I owe you a life. Five minutes more and I'd been at the bottom of that canyon, a shapeless mass of flesh. Whatever good luck in life I have after this I owe to you, and if I ever have a chance to help you, I'll risk all in the cause."

"I know how you feel, but we'll slide over it lightly. Many words are not needed among white men, and now we've crossed hands it is all square. But how did you get in that fix?"

"I am a miner of Silver Spur, and it was because I came out on a hunt to-day that I got into trouble. I shot a goat, which fell partly over the precipice, and in trying to get him I went too. As I said, you saved my life; but if you will accompany me to Silver Spur you shall find I know how to use a man white. My name is Otis Sprague."

"Mine is David Canton."

"David Canyon? Well, that's an appropriate name for the work you have just done. I owe you one, Dave Canyon, for pulling me out of the canyon."

"You misunderstand me. I did not say Canyon, but Canton," explained the owner of the name, smiling. "Call me what you please, though. Make it Canyon Dave, if you wish."

"That's what I'll call you, by Jupiter. The word means something big, and I take it you can shoulder it well. But, what say, are you off to Silver Spur with me?"

"Yes. I intended to bring you there, sooner or later, so I'll go along with you."

By that time Sprague had recovered his strength and usual calmness, and they left the scene of his peril behind them and started for Silver Spur.

It was a mining town packed in among the Sierra Nevada mountains, and quite an enterprising one at the date of our story, though but a year old, but it has never gained a national reputation.

As the young men passed along the mountain side Sprague grew quite communicative. He was an Ohio man, had sought California to act as clerk in San Francisco, but had caught the mining fever, and for five years had been trying to make a fortune in that way.

"Canyon Dave," as Sprague took pains to call his companion, was not so communicative, but from fragmentary explanations he made, his companion discovered that he had been a wanderer in the West, principally among the mountains, for several years and Sprague was not long in deciding that, despite his youth—he

was about twenty-five—he was a cool, brave man, who had seen a good deal of wild life, and knew pretty well how to take care of himself.

CHAPTER II.

CANYON DAVE MAKES NEW ACQUAINTANCES.

CONVERSING pleasantly, the young men went on for two miles, and then Sprague paused on the crest of a ridge and stretched out one hand.

"D'y'e see that peak over yonder?" he asked. "Yes," answered Canton. "Rough-looking place, isn't it?"

"Rough! That's no name for it. It's all one tumbled-up mass of rocks and canyons and caves are thick as mice. Nobody has ever fully explored it yet, but I reckon we will have to soon."

"Why?"

"Well, Silver Spur has always been an orderly place until of late, panning out white citizens, and no roughs or road-agents; but the other day two of our boys were stopped while taking away their dust and gone through by masked men. Worse than that, a reckless sort of a note was given one of them which said that in future no pilgrim could pass through the Camel's Hump—that's the name of the peak—without paying toll to Captain Nevada."

"Judging by which, I should say you are in for a regular road-agent reign."

"It won't work at Silver Spur; there's too much pluck among the natives. Once let those fellows take toll of Judge Parmenter or Barclay Brothers and you'll see the fur fly. The parties I just named run the biggest mines at the Spur, and they don't stand any foolishing either."

"Good for them," said Canyon Dave, who was really interested, because he was about to become a citizen of this mountain town.

"Right at the foot of the Camel's Hump lies Silver Spur. We can't see it from here, but we'll go on and find it."

Sprague had taken one step in advance when a mountain goat suddenly darted into view at a point within easy rifle-shot. He remembered the animal he had lost when he so nearly lost his own life, and his rifle darted to his shoulder.

The goat had paused, and with so good a chance before him, the miner paused for a sure bead; but, before he could press the trigger, the target suddenly went off the rock and fell in a heap, while a rifle-crack rung out at a point among the rocks in front of them.

Sprague paused in surprise and annoyance, for he did not relish being robbed of his game; but, just then, a merry laugh sounded from the same vicinity as the shot, and another person appeared on the scene.

Dave Canton had been surprised at the laugh, for one so musical could only have been uttered by a woman; but he was more surprised when the marksman leaped upon a rock and stood facing them, a bright smile on her face and a confused mixture of black and red floating back of her as her flowing hair and brilliant colored shawl were caught by the wind.

"Gus Hackett, by thunder!" muttered Sprague.

"Hal! hal! where is your game, Otis, the Slow?" the girl demanded, with another laugh.

The miner's melancholy look vanished, and he first laughed and then shook his fist at the girl.

"Oh! you look out, 'Gus Hackett!'" he shouted, in assumed anger. "I'll be even with you for this. You ought to be ashamed to take bread—I mean meat—from a poor bachelor's mouth; but you'll see stars one of these days to pay for it, now you mind!"

Before he finished she had leaped off the rock, and was running toward them, trailing a small rifle.

Dave Canton looked at her closely. Was she a child or a woman? He scarcely knew; but she had the physical development of one with the manners of the other. At any rate, she was of an age and appearance to be admired, and he was not at all backward in paying mute homage.

"Did you think you could shoot?" she asked, in her former vein, addressing Sprague, and never heeding David in the least. "Why, if I hadn't come to the rescue, that sheep would have been a mile from here by this time, and your bullet would have been a dead loss to the community."

"You're a wicked wretch to make fun of me before strangers; but I'll have my revenge some day. Now, then, do stop your nonsense and come down to solid facts. Miss 'Gus Hackett, this is Canyon Dave."

Her smile faded somewhat as she turned to Canton, but she put out her hand frankly.

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Canyon Dave, though I am sorry to say the company you are in don't recommend you very highly. There! there! pardon me; poor Mr. Sprague is looking shocked and you will think me a savage. I hope I am that entirely, but I have the habit of being very good friends with some of the men of Silver Spur. Otis is one of them."

"Happy Otis!" remarked Mr. Canton.

She put out her hand quickly.

"Don't! I'll return your compliment far enough to say I like your looks well enough, so

that I don't want to be at enmity with you, which will certainly be the case if we try pretty speeches. Otis knows that won't be allowed."

"I can swear it by my ears. You've boxed 'em often enough," said that individual, with a grimace.

David was almost carried off his feet by the looks and ways of Miss Hackett. He had seen a good many varieties of the female sex between Lower California and Puget's Sound, but she impressed him more than any of them.

Somehow, after ten minutes' further delay, they managed to get in motion toward Silver Spur, and David, walking beside the girl, found the intervening distance incredibly short.

Silver Spur loomed up ahead of them all too soon, they had emerged from a gulch, and before them lay the town.

A humble one it was, everywhere showing evidence of hasty workmanship, though it had some buildings of considerable size, surrounded on three sides by a curving bluff so steep as to be in many places a cliff, and with a wooded hillside on the fourth.

Fair and peaceful, if not grand, looked the mountain town, and Canyon Dave was well pleased.

Sprague had paused and stretched out his hand to deliver a little oration, when a crashing among the aforementioned bushes was followed by the appearance of a man who was a typical miner in every way.

Broad of shoulder and strong of limb, he was tanned to a brown almost Indian-like, and his rough but honest-looking face, taken together with his dress, left no doubt of his business.

"The senior member of the firm of Hackett," explained Sprague.

"Gus forced a frown to her face.

"My father, you mean. Gray hairs must be respected; mustn't they, father?"

The closing question was addressed to the new-comer.

"Ef it warn't an old joke, I'd say et depends on whar you find 'em; nobody wants 'em in the'r butter," was the good-natured answer, as the speaker nodded to Sprague.

"You are all against me," said the girl. "Here, you wicked man, see if you can speak politely to Mr. David Canyon."

The big hand of the miner closed over that of the mis-named man.

"Stranger," said he, "thar's food an' drink up in our cabin, an' ef we kin git thar ahead o' my darter, we kin have a squar' meal. Ef she gets thar first—"

"Gus held up a warning hand.

"Brad Hackett, beware!" she solemnly said. "A little more such abuse, and you don't get cooked food for a week!"

The man burst into a laugh in which Sprague joined, and though David could hardly keep pace with the current of events, he managed to smile in concert.

After that all talked more soberly. On being questioned Dave explained that he intended to make Silver Spur his home for awhile, and thought of taking quarters with Otis in his cabin; whereupon Hackett cordially invited him to call often at their own home, and when 'Gus echoed the words, the young man did not hesitate to promise that they should see him there.

The Hackett house was a little out of the village, and after awhile they said good-by to the others, and went away through the trees.

Canyon Dave looked after them earnestly, but his attention was all on 'Gus.

A handsome and brilliant girl she was, with her fine face and form and her dashing ways, and as there was at all times a certain refinement mixed with her words, they did not sound rude.

For the most part, her dress was appropriate for the mountains; a wide hat, a dark-brown dress with short skirts, and Indian moccasins, being the chief features; but the fleecy scarlet shawl thrown over her shoulders was not in keeping and betrayed her feminine love for finery, though Dave was free to confess to himself that it made her look still more handsome.

"Better than hunting grizzlies, eh?"

Otis Sprague whispered the words in his ear and then laughed as he started.

"Don't apologize," he continued, "for nobody could help admiring 'Gus Hackett, but she isn't the only attraction in Silver Spur. Judge Parmenter has three daughters, Edna, Helen, and Millicent, and I tell you they are not slow."

"Miss Hackett is very well educated for a common miner's daughter," said Dave, absently.

"Oh! Brad hasn't spared any expense. She has been to school in 'Frisco, and she can be as demure as the statelyst woman of fashion if she tries, but her heart is large and warm, and she loves the mountains and their freedom. Brad just worships her, and you know what that means with a man like him. He has a heart like an ox, in point of size. But I'll give you further statistics later. For now let's go on to my cabin."

CHAPTER III.

A PAIR OF PLOTTERS.

DAVID CANTON'S first week at Silver Spur does not require detailed notice here, as he met

with no startling adventures, but it was one of considerable importance in its way.

He made his home with Sprague and settled down to mining with him for a partner, and he soon showed that he was no novice at the business. When the people of the village learned this fact and found out besides that he was a fine shot, he gained a firm hold on their regards and was generally liked.

Every one adopted the name Otis Sprague had given him under the impulse of the moment, and as Canyon Dave he was known to all in Silver Spur.

During the week, he had twice called on the Hacketts, and as they received him with their former kindness, he regarded them as among the best friends he had in the vicinity.

He had made one discovery since his arrival which the reader will plainly see to be a fact further on—Otis Sprague had a strong fancy for Edna, one of the daughters of Judge Parmenter, whom we have before heard mentioned.

Sprague, however, labored under one disadvantage. He was not well supplied with worldly goods, while the judge was a wealthy man, and for that reason there had been a marked coldness, though no open quarrel, between them. We believe such cases have been recorded before, but this does not interfere with our reliability as a historian when we assert that a stern parent did exist in Silver Spur at that time, and is liable to spring up now and then while the world lasts.

As for Edna, herself, she had never said that Sprague's poverty was against him, nor, lacking proper encouragement on his part, had she ever confessed that she cared for him.

One afternoon, a week subsequent to Sprague's adventure in the mountain, Edna was rambling about the hills to the south of the village. She had a taste for geological research, in a quiet way, and such was the object, if any existed, of the present ramble.

She was a pretty girl, as all Silver Spur had acknowledged, and, indeed, all the daughters of Judge Parmenter were considered a credit to California. There was a strong resemblance between them, of which, more hereafter, all being of a brunette type which was commonly pronounced brilliant.

Still, none of the three was like 'Gus Hackett. They were more inclined to quiet lives, had a strong taste for household duties, and on the whole were girls such as any man could safely take to himself for life if he was lucky enough to get one of them.

Edna, on this particular occasion, seated herself on a bowlder, after a long ramble, and began to examine the geological specimens she had collected, unconscious that she was herself under scrutiny at the time.

A little before a man had been wandering along the hillside, but he had paused at sight of her and stood behind a large rock, furtively watching her as she looked over her treasures.

This man was rather good-looking to a certain degree. He had a good form, a regularly-formed face, a handsome black moustache and hair and eyes of color to match. One thing more was just as easily seen; the dress and face of the man betrayed the fact that he was a Mexican.

For a long time he stood behind the rock and played the spy, but at length he resumed his way and approached Edna with all the grace he could muster.

She saw him, and a troubled look passed over her face. She did not like Mexicans, and, though she had seen this man at Silver Spur on the previous day, she wanted no more intimate acquaintance with him and hoped he would pass on; so, to encourage him to that end, she became suddenly very busy over her collection.

But the man calmly paused in front of her.

"Pardon, senorita," he politely said; "but may I admire with you the curiosities you have? They are fine—magnifica!"

Edna was annoyed, and resolved to discourage him. She did not raise her eyes, and coldly answered:

"They are only rocks, sir."

"True, true, senorita; but if they had not been to your liking, you would not have gathered them. Am I not right? I admire such things myself. Can you tell me the name of this particular stone?"

He had selected the rarest of the lot and coolly taken it from her possession, but his assurance helped him but little.

"Pardon me," said Edna, coolly; "but I am not a lecturer or teacher on the subject. You will have to consult some other authority."

He could not misunderstand so plain a rebuff, but his face showed no sign of confusion.

"Caramba! I must ask pardon in turn," he said, removing his hat. "I fear I was too careless in addressing you as I did—too familiar, I think you call it. Let me introduce myself. I am Miguel Perez, and am at present making my home at the Alexis Hotel. I had seen you in the village, Miss Parmenter, and I addressed you before I remembered that we were strangers. I hope you will pardon me."

"It is nothing," Edna calmly answered. "Did you say you admired the specimen you hold in your hand?"

"It is splendid!" Perez declared.

"Then I will make you a present of it. I have more at home. Good-day, sir."

And then Miss Parmenter quietly arose, gave Senor Perez a short, unsatisfactory nod, stepped past him and went on her way to the village, leaving Miguel pulling at his mustache and looking decidedly dissatisfied.

In a little while, however, he shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"The bird is timid," he said, aloud, "but I will tame it yet. A woman likes to show her power by making a man run after her."

"Judged by a man's wisdom," commented a sarcastic voice behind him.

He wheeled quickly. Another woman had appeared on the scene, and one worthy of a second glance. She was of good form and comely features; some might even have called her brilliant; but she lacked the youth, innocence and attractiveness of Edna. Her face did not show that she was really wicked, but it was that of a woman of the world and would not invite confidence. She had probably seen thirty years of life, but, though all claims to youth had gone from her face, she was what is commonly called well preserved.

A smile passed over Miguel's face as he met her.

"You here?" he slowly said.

"I judge that I am. What of it? Did you expect me to stay cooped up at that miserable hotel all day? It wasn't in the bargain when I came to Silver Spur. Bah! I detest the place. The life is not equal to the mountain cave and Captain Nevada's wine."

"Hush!" he said, with a quick glance around them. "Why do you speak that word here? These poor devils of gold-diggers have no love for Captain Nevada, and if they knew we were of his band they would give us the rope."

"Bah! what of it? Would it be our first? How many camps have we bled and died? Go to the miners of California from the Gulf to the extreme north; go ask the bones of their legions that fertilize the California plains. Let them bring their ropes. I told you, ten years ago, that if you linked your fortunes with mine no harm would ever come to you. The devil protects his own. Am I not right, senor?—Ah! what is your present name? Perez, I think, and I am Persis Somebody-or-other. Excellent, we make—"

"In the fiend's name, cease your babbling!" Miguel morosely interrupted. "Do you want all California to know our business?"

"No, but I must get rid of some of my ugliness before I play angel at Silver Spur. Fancy me playing the innocent to the gold kings of the camp—Parmenter, the Barclay Brothers, and so on. Won't it be rich?"

"It will if we can make ten thousand out of it."

"Now, you touch the tuneful chord, Don Miguel. Well, *amigo mio*, we will try. Meanwhile, I see you have taken a fancy to Edna Parmenter as a side show."

"Caramba! why do you think so? You are wrong—"

"Bah! Drop your innocence. Don't look surprised. See here, Miguel, a proposition for you. Allow me to engineer a private game of my own at the Spur, and you may smile all you choose on Edna; ay, I'll even help you."

"Do you mean it, Persis?" he asked, looking at her fixedly.

"I do, honestly."

"I agree; but what is your own game?"

"Bah! you are too curious. Men always are, women never would be, had they poorer tutors. As for the fair Edna, let me offer a suggestion."

"What is it?"

"Call on Captain Nevada for aid. Ask him to attempt an abduction, with the understanding that you appear on the scene as a gallant rescuer right at the crisis. Result, the fair Edna is grateful, then tender, lastly, dead in love. She is young and unworried; she must be romantic."

"There is something in it," said Miguel, thoughtfully, "but the trick is an old one. Won't she suspect?"

"No, why should she? The case is clear and the coast without a rock. Maybe I can help you, or, at the least, drive into her mind the fact that you are a hero and an angel. And you really are, Miguel. You can face lead boldly, while as an angel you rank as a second Lucifer."

"Another sneer," the Mexican grumbled.

"All for love!" she declared, with a reckless laugh.

"Well, I'll see Captain Nevada and ask for his aid. For the present, let us go back to the hotel."

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN NEVADA.

THEY returned to the village but not together. Old partners in crime, they had come to Silver Spur on a secret mission, which was to aid Captain Nevada, the robber of Camel's Hump, to secure more gold from the people of the camp; but, though both stopped at the same hotel, they were outwardly only new acquaintances.

Persis reached the Alexis Hotel first and went to her room; which was on the second floor.

The village had but one regularly shaped street, and this, near the center, expanded into a space which was like a half moon.

Her room looked out upon this place, and she at once hastened to the window and sat down where she could watch the passers-by. They were few in number, but, anon, came Canyon Dave and Otis Sprague.

The eyes of the woman sparkled, and, from her cover, she threw a kiss at the former. He saw nothing of it; he did not know that the world held a Persis Ripley; but she watched him from sight, as the partners went to their work, and then laughed mockingly.

"What a fool I am! I have not been so much affected for five years; I am worse than a school-girl. I even believe I could call this handsome Canyon Dave, my 'hero,' if he would give me proper inducements. Bah! he would sneer if he knew of my passion, but I'll wager a gold mine under the Pacific that I bring him to my feet inside of a month. Done!"

And then this woman, herself the chief of sneerers, cast herself on the lounge preparatory to an afternoon nap.

Meanwhile, in the bar room below, Miguel Perez smoked and drank as he reflected deeply and laid plans for the future. He had expected Persis to object most decidedly to his paying court to Edna Parmenter, but once she did not he was resolved to make the most of it.

An hour later he left the hotel and the village and climbed up the steep side of Camel's Hump until he was near the top.

He was still going when a voice hailed him, and, looking around, he perceived a man sitting on a rock in an indolent way. His own face brightened and he went forward.

"Taking an airing, captain?" he asked, with a little deference in his manner.

"I am looking over my kingdom," was the calm reply. "There is a splendid view from here, Miguel. Straight down lies the village, and I can see men as they go and come from the Alexis Hotel to get their fire-water. More than that, I can see where are located the mines of Judge Parmenter and Barclay Brothers, and I mentally figure, as I sit here, what will be my share of their profits."

"I'll do all I can for you," said Miguel.

"Of course you will; it's to your own interest, and gold is the lever that moves the world. I'm not Captain Nevada because I love the life, but because I want to get rich. If that day ever comes, you'll see me in 'Frisco, or further east, playing the sport."

"You don't look very rusty now," said Miguel, who had an ax to grind, and was using flattery for a purpose.

Captain Nevada, for the man was indeed he, stretched out his hand and laughed. He was a rather handsome fellow, with his blonde hair and mustache, his blue eyes and good form; but though his voice was soft and his smile actually pleasant, those who knew him best feared his deadly revolvers and the hot temper which was terrible when aroused.

He was dressed in a suit of velveteen, with a red sash about his waist, a yellow-corded sombrero on his head, and on the small hand he extended was a genuine diamond ring.

Such was the robber of Camel's Hump.

"How is everything down below?" he abruptly asked, after a pause.

"All well and lovely," Miguel answered.

"No danger of that woman of yours getting stubborn, is there?"

"Persis is all right," said the Mexican, with a slight show of annoyance.

"Don't let her get indolent. I want to push business and make money fast. Silver Spur is going to be a lively village unless I get tripped up before I get the wheels of my chariot well in motion. I'm a new-comer at Camel's Hump, but I've come to feed my ravens."

On the following day, Edna Parmenter was alone at her father's house, her sisters, Millicent and Helen, having gone out some time before; so it fell to her lot to answer the knock which sounded at the door.

She went and found a very sleek-faced Chinaman outside, and at sight of her his face grew more good-natured and happy than ever.

"You her, all samee?" he asked, holding out a letter.

Edna looked and saw her name written on the envelope, but the handwriting was strange, though evidently that of a woman.

"Yes, it is for me. Where did you get it?"

"Gib to me, all samee, welly little while ago over there. Give me dollar takee it here. You say it for you—all welly good. So long!"

The Chinaman walked away unnoticed by Edna, who was reading the letter. It was signed by the name of "Gus Hackett," and stated that she had been taken suddenly ill, and asked Edna to call upon her at once.

Miss Parmenter did not for one moment suspect that there was fraud in the note. She had never become acquainted with 'Gus, but she knew her well by sight, and knowing that she had neither sister nor mother of her own, did not think it strange that she should send for her in such a case. Without a particle of hesitation she decided to go.

Her preparations were soon made, and leaving the house, she left the village proper and started for Brad Hackett's cabin.

As we have before said, this little dwelling stood outside of the village and at the side of a ridge which was a sort of foothill for the Camel's Hump. Between the cabin and the village was a wood which covered the space of two acres, in a belt form, and was the only sign of trees to be found near Silver Spur until the pines of the upper peak were reached.

Through this timber belt ran Edna's road, but she had often crossed the ground before and now approached it without a sign of fear.

Hence it was with mingled surprise and alarm that she saw four men suddenly emerge from cover and block her way—all of whom were strangers to her, while their garments were wild and by far too gaudy for honest miners.

At their head was a dashing-looking fellow in a velveteen suit, a red sash and a brigand-like hat, and Edna did not feel particularly drawn toward him even when he politely removed the sombrero.

"Good-morning, my dear," this man gallantly said; "I see you have promptly answered my letter."

"Your letter, sir?" said the girl, pausing most unwillingly. "You are mistaken: I have not received any letter from you and I do not know you."

"Pardon me, but it is you who are mistaken. You did receive my letter, or you would not be here. I sent it by a John Chinaman; and, to make the lever more effective, I signed the name of our mutual friend, 'Gus Hackett.'"

"Then that letter was a forgery?"

Edna's eyes were sparkling with sudden anger and she gave the man the full benefit of her opinion in her glance, but his smiling face did not change.

"I suppose that is what you call it," he blandly answered, "I regard it as a little stratagem."

"But I consider it a contemptible trick," she boldly declared, disregarding the fact that she was confronted by four strange men.

"All is fair in love and war, my dear, as you will acknowledge when I explain. You see, I have seen you and fallen in love with your pretty face. I want you for my wife, but I know your stately parent would object to me, so I use a little strategy instead of facing him. Why? Because I am Captain Nevada, at your service."

He bowed politely, but, for the first time, an uneasy look came to Edna's face. Captain Nevada had only recently appeared in the Silver Spur country, but since his coming he had made an unenviable reputation. He was a road-robber, and he might be worse.

"Don't be frightened," he continued, as she did not speak. "Captain Nevada is only dreadful to his enemies. In your case, he is your most devoted and humble servant. I am going to take you to my palace in the heart of Camel's Hump, and once there we will live and reign like a prince and princess of old."

During this address Edna had been thinking busily. It was plain that the road-agent was fully in earnest, but she had no taste for the life he pictured. She must and would escape, if such a thing was possible.

He concluded his speech with another mocking bow, and she seized the opportunity to wheel and attempt flight, but she had miscalculated his own agility.

He gave one quick, light bound, and was by her side with his strong grasp on her arm.

"Not so fast, my pretty!" he said, still laughing. "I can't allow such jokes at my expense, and as a sign of your repentance you must here and now give me a kiss from your rosy lips."

Edna was struggling in his grasp, but she might as well have fought against the mountain. His muscles were of steel, and, never losing his temper, he drew her toward him to carry out his threat.

An unlooked-for interruption came; a man sprung from the bushes and sent Captain Nevada to the earth with one blow; and then, as the girl's champion, who was none other than Otis Sprague, stepped in front of her, Canyon Dave appeared close behind and both stood with leveled revolvers.

"Hands up!" cried Dave, sharply. "We hold the fort just at present, and the man who draws his weapons invites lead. Up with your hands, I say!"

They were not fools, those knights of the road, and they knew that before they could draw their revolvers the new-comers could riddle them, so up went their hands very promptly.

Captain Nevada slowly regained his feet, his unusual moderation causing Canyon Dave to suspect that he was maturing some plan. He had received a heavy blow, but one which would do him no permanent injury, and it was rather surprising that he did not at once draw and fire.

Just then another man emerged from cover and presented a revolver at Nevada's head.

"Hands up, you dog!" he shouted. "Give one sign of resistance and out go your brains!"

The last comer was Miguel Perez.

Plainly the game was in the hands of Edna's defenders, but all were surprised when Captain

Nevada sat down on a rock and began to laugh as though he had met with the greatest joke of his life.

Very few would have acted thus when menaced with cocked revolvers, but there was a vein of humor in the affair. As the reader has suspected, the affair was all a plot devised by the Mexican. The road-agent did not desire Edna, but he had agreed to do his part to oblige Perez, and that individual was to appear at the crisis and act the part of a champion and hero.

Unluckily for Perez, Sprague and Canyon Dave had chanced to be near, and they had usurped his cultivated honors; and when Perez emerged from the bushes to take the crumbs which fell from the real champions' table, as we may say, the gay road-robber was so struck with the ludicrous feature of the case that he sat down and did justice to his feelings.

"Carajo!" cried Miguel, fiercely, "this is no laughing matter. The ladies of Silver Spur are not to be thus insulted. Curse you! I am tempted to put a bullet through your head."

"Don't do it," answered Nevada, suddenly arising. "It destroys the beauty of a corpse to have his head all banged to pieces. However, I am disposed to let you have your own way in this case to a certain extent. With your permission I will retire."

"Don't be so fast," interrupted Sprague. "Who are you, and why have you molested this lady?"

"He says he is Captain Nevada," explained Edna, with a coolness which might in a considerable degree have been due to Sprague's protecting arm.

CHAPTER V.

MIGUEL FORMS ANOTHER PLOT.

EDNA'S revelation fell with considerable force on each one of the men, though the effect was not alike on all. Nevada, Miguel and the minor robbers were wondering how they were going to get out of their dilemma, while Canyon Dave and Sprague, who had suspected the leader's identity from the first, grew more beligerent than ever.

"We are glad to meet you, Captain Nevada," said Dave, "and I believe you are wanted at Silver Spur."

The smile on the robber's face gave place to a more serious and, at the same time, hostile look.

"See here, you young idiot!" he said, "let me give you a word of advice. Don't step on the tail of a rattlesnake unless you have his head in limbo. I don't aspire to a quarrel with you, and I'll go quietly about my business if you don't object, but if you push me to the wall, look out for the claws of Captain Nevada. I've blown my bugle and now you can try yours."

"We hold the drop here and we mean business in dead earnest," said Canyon Dave. "You are wanted at the village and we propose to take you in."

"I advise you not to try," said the road-agent; and then he removed his hat and began fanning himself with remarkable coolness.

Meanwhile, Miguel Perez had been frantically trying to think of some way to end the scene in Captain Nevada's favor. At the best, it was clear that Canyon Dave and Sprague had wrested the honors from him, and he resolved that the road-agents should escape even though he injured himself in aiding them.

He knew their courage and that all that was necessary was to free them for one moment from the miners' revolvers, and he resolved to do it.

Consequently, he suddenly pushed forward and thrust his revolver almost into the face of the robber capt in.

"Carajo!" he cried, "you shall go and you shall hang, you dog!"

All this was simple enough, but in thus pushing to the front, Perez had walked between the outlaws and the revolvers which covered them, and the result was startling and so quick as to be bewildering.

Nevada promptly knocked Perez down, or seemed to, and in another instant all the robbers were in the bushes and making good their retreat, followed only by a few wild shots.

Canyon Dave might have pursued more resolutely, but Perez lay flat on the ground and Sprague could not leave Edna; and as it would hardly be policy for him to pursue four men alone, the mountaineer kept his place.

"Confound the luck!" he muttered, "we have lost our game after neatly bagging it!"

"All because of that fellow on the ground," said Sprague, looking sourly at Perez. "Play a measure of Yankee Doodle on his ribs with your boot and see if he is alive."

"No, no!" interposed Edna. "He aided you at the first, and it was thoughtlessness on his part that he passed in front of your revolvers."

"Bless you, we won't harm him," said Sprague, laughing. "I don't love his race, but I never kick a man when he is down. Better look after him, Canyon Dave."

But just then Miguel, who had merely been feigning insensibility, saw fit to roll over, and, after looking about him as though dazed, to loudly lament the escape of Captain Nevada.

Shortly after, 'Gus Hackett' appeared, going

toward her home, and when fully convinced that the letter had been a forgery, Edna decided to return to the village.

Preparations for departure were made by Dave pairing with Gus and Sprague with Edna, and Perez, thus left out in the cold, first walked on until alone and then swore in Spanish until his troubled mind was a little relieved.

Really, his plan had been a lamentable failure. He had failed to figure as the hero of his little plot, and, worse than all the rest, another man had appeared and so conducted himself that he had all the credit of beating off the robbers, after which of course he would be considered a hero by Edna.

"Oh, curse the luck!" the thwarted Mexican exclaimed, as he ground his heel into the earth. "Why did I wait so long? Five seconds more and it would have been me, not these infernal miners, who would have come to her rescue."

His anger had turned hotly against the two partners, especially Otis Sprague, in whom he saw a dangerous rival. He was a man still on the bright side of thirty, good-looking, as Perez was frank enough to confess, and it would be the most natural thing in the world if the thread of romance thus begun should go on to an actual love affair.

"Carajo! I will kill him if he dares think of it!" Miguel hissed.

Suddenly a new expression shot across his face and he put his hand in his pocket and drew out a small tin box. He opened it and looked with a dark smile at the gray powder it contained.

"One pinch of that ends the life of the man who takes it," he muttered. "Why should I not take a stitch in time, as the Yankees say, and stop the mischief of this accursed miner? By my life, I will. Ah! we will see who wins!"

He started through the bushes at a trot and soon reached a point opposite the eastern end of the village. So far, for very good reasons, he had kept under cover, but as he neared a small cabin near the end of the main street, he first looked carefully about to make sure that he was not observed, and then strode to the building.

It was simple, like that of most miners, only a place to sleep and eat, but it was all that he desired. The sight of half of a mountain sheep hanging from a peg caused his eyes to sparkle, but as he started toward it, he suddenly paused.

Upon the rude table was a black bottle. He lifted it, smelt of the contents and found it to be whisky.

"Good! good!" he commented, "this is better still. I will add that to their drink which shall make them sleep forever."

Then he again drew the box of gray powder from his pocket and poured a tablespoonful of the stuff into the bottle, after which he shook it thoroughly.

"It is done!" he then muttered; "when they drink of that stuff they are dead men, and no one will stand between me and Edna Parmenter. Ah! it is not safe to meddle with Miguel Perez."

He smiled as though greatly pleased at something and then left the cabin and returned to the wood, making his way in a roundabout course back to the Alexis Hotel, where he found Persis Ripley awaiting him.

"Well, what luck?" she asked.

"The worst," he growled, as he flung himself into a chair. "Your plan worked just like all women's schemes, just as I knew it would."

"Why, you told me this morning that it was sure to succeed."

"I was trying to keep my courage up," he muttered, unwilling to confess that he was finding fault because he knew he was safe in venting his anger on his partner in villainy.

"Tell me about it," she quietly said.

He gave full particulars of everything except his visit to the cabin, and Persis, in her way, expressed her sympathy and encouraged him to hope for the gifts of the future.

Secretly, he did have a good deal of hope, but it was because he had mixed the gray powder in the liquor at the cabin. When Otis Sprague and Canyon Dave had swallowed a little of that stuff, their lives would not be worth a picayune.

"I begin my work to-morrow," said Persis, abruptly.

"Ah!—and how?"

"Well, I shall visit Barclay Brothers, and, also, Judge Parmenter, and then we will see if I have lost my old powers of fascination."

"Do your best, Persis, for Captain Nevada expects it."

"The bold brigand shall be satisfied, but, at the same time, it is possible that we may gain more than he."

"In what way?"

"Well, Miguel, you know it is our creed to look out for ourselves first of all. Suppose, then, while seeking to fascinate these mine-owners so as to transfer their gold from their own pockets to those of Nevada and the band—suppose that, in doing this, I so fascinate one of them that he makes an offer of marriage. Hadn't I better accept and leave Captain Nevada to shift for himself?"

"He would betray you."

"I believe, Miguel, that we know how to use our knives. Let Nevada prove ugly and I will put him off the stage forever."

"So far, very good," said Miguel slowly, "but your proposed plan leaves me out in the cold, and robs me of you."

Persis laughed quietly.

"Bah! do you think I would settle down to a humdrum life with any of these drudging fools? No; once let me get my hands on their money-bags and then we will clear out and leave my loving husband disconsolate."

Miguel showed his white teeth in an appreciative smile.

"Bravo, querida mia," he said. "With all these plans we ought to fill our empty purses, and then, hurrah! for another season in the gay capital of Mexico!"

CHAPTER VI.

A MISSING HEIRESS.

A FEW weeks before the events of our last chapter, on a pleasant afternoon, a man was walking along one of the finest streets of San Francisco. He came at length to a house which he scanned with close attention and then ascended the steps and rung the bell.

The summons was answered by a gray-haired negro, to whom the applicant nodded familiarly as he entered without formality.

"How do you do, Cleon? How is Mr. Browning?" he asked.

"I's well, Massa Harper, but I's afeered de ole massa is about gone, sah," replied Cleon, with a profound sigh.

"Is he worse?"

"He's growin' weaker, sah, an' de doctor looks mighty anxious. Go right up and see him, sah."

Thomas Harper went up the wide stairway, but when his back was turned toward Cleon his look of grave concern gave place to a smile.

"Almost gone!" he thought, exultantly. "He can't last long, and when he is once out of the way I shall know just where I stand. What will be my reward for years of plotting, fawning and waiting? It can't be any trifle, for old Silas has no heirs except that girl who disappeared fifteen years ago, so mysteriously, and I am sure she will never be found. Perhaps I will get twenty-five or even fifty thousand dollars; I ought to, but we will see. Well, now to play the sympathizing friend."

He entered a room which had two occupants.

One was a tall, impressive-looking man, a physician, if appearances went for anything; but the second, who lay upon a bed, seemed like one near his earthly journey's end. His face was very pale, and he seemed to breathe with difficulty.

He raised his hand with an effort and Harper, taking it between his own, anxiously spoke.

"How are you, to-day, Browning? I do believe you have more color; and I think Doctor Moore will pull you through yet."

"Useless, Thomas, useless," was the faint reply. "I know your goodness of heart, your friendship, but it cannot mend my body. Tell him the situation, Doctor Moore, as plainly as you have me."

The eyes of the physician and the visitor met.

"Before a week," said the former, steadily, "all will be over. Medicine cannot save what is so surely destined for the grave."

"Oh! doctor, is it possible? Is there no hope? You say there is no positive disease."

Thomas Harper had grasped at the back of a chair, and Moore quickly arose, offered him a glass of water and forced him gently into a seat.

"You are faint," said the man of medicine; "You must not excite yourself. Be calm, for death is the inheritance of mankind. There is none so poor, and none so rich, as to lose their heritage. In the case of Mr. Browning, it is a gradual sundering of the strands of life. Our existence here is, if I may use the comparison, like that of a boat tied by a rope to a rock in the ocean. The storms beat upon the boat, just as they do on mankind, and, little by little, the rope is worn and weakened. When the last strand is severed the boat drifts away."

A brief silence followed this long speech, and the solemn manner of the physician threw a gloom over Harper's feelings which enabled him to easily act the sorrowful friend while he remained, and which speedily sent him to a liquor saloon when he was outside.

"Confound that doctor!" he muttered. "I am actually afraid of him. He ought to be a grave digger, and then he could soliloquize about such things all he wishes. I hope he will hurry up his killing of old Browning!"

Evidently, fate intended to be kind to him, for on the following day came news that Silas Browning had finished the battle of life, whereupon, Harper, forgetful of the fact that he was fifty years of age, executed a dance of joy.

He had desired this occurrence for sixteen years, ever since his sister, Martha, married the rich man.

It had been a union upon which Heaven surely never smiled, for on the part of Martha Harper it had been one of sordid interest and deliberate plotting. Browning was rich, while she and her worthless brother, Thomas, were as

poor as they were unscrupulous; but Martha's arts won the day and she became the second Mrs. Browning.

The second, because the rich man had once before been married; and Martha became a step-mother when she became a wife. Browning had one child, a daughter, which had survived his first union, and he believed he was securing some one who would care tenderly for the orphaned babe.

Perhaps it would have been so, but, a year later, when little Miriam was three years of age, she had been stolen and no clew to her whereabouts ever obtained.

Two children were born of Browning's second marriage, but neither of them long survived, and, twelve years later, the rich man found himself again a widower.

We may here say that the death of Martha was the bitterest blow Thomas Harper had ever received. Not that he cared so very much for her, though she was his sister, but she had all along helped him a good deal and he was hoping she would some day be the sole possessor of Silas Browning's wealth.

His emotion at her death found vent in curses both loud and deep, strange mourning for a sister's loss; but when he had recovered his mental equilibrium he set himself to the task of being the widower's best friend, and as he had never been rebuffed, he hoped for a good deal now the man was dead.

Harper knew he had left no relatives to inherit his property, except that one baby girl who had been stolen fifteen years before, and Thomas had good reasons for believing she would not appear to claim the inheritance.

Mr. Browning's funeral occurred, Harper managed to squeeze out a few tears over the coffin, and then only the reading of the will remained to be done as the closing act in the drama of sixteen years' duration.

It was read in the parlor of the family house, in the presence of a dozen friends, among whom were Doctor Moore, Harper, and Cleon, the black servant.

First of all, small legacies were devised to certain parties, including one to Cleon, and then came a clause which created some surprise around the room and especially affected Thomas Harper.

"The residue of my estate shall be held in trust for the space of one year, by the executors, to be disposed of at the end of that time as follows: If my daughter, Miriam Agnes Browning, stolen by parties unknown, in the year 18—, shall within that time return to claim her own, or shall in any manner be discovered, all this property shall become hers on her twenty-first birthday, and during her minority Thomas Harper shall be her guardian and have full management of the estate, with ten thousand dollars at the end of that time as recompense for his labor; but if the said Miriam Agnes Browning be not found, all the residue of the estate shall go to the — Hospital."

And Harper, Moore and Lawyer Oakes were named as executors.

That night, in the solitude of his chamber, Thomas Harper again indulged in a flood tide of profanity. He had been baffled after sixteen years of plotting; and to him the bulk of Silas Browning's wealth would never come.

"It's nothing if the girl isn't found, and it's about the same if she is," he thought, savagely.

"Ten thousand if I find her, while she will get a hundred thousand. By Jove, I half believe Browning suspected that I knew of her present whereabouts; else why did he make such a will? If she is not found I remain a beggar; if she is I get ten thousand dollars. By my life, I believe that was a bid for my efforts to find the fair Miriam; but I won't do it. What! take ten thousand and get her all the rest of the property for which I have so long schemed? I guess not. I'll see the whole business— But wait; there is one thing more."

An eager look had come upon his face, and his eyes sparkled as he looked fixedly at the fire in the grate.

"If she is found," he slowly muttered, "I am to have entire charge of the estate for the space of two years. Ah! that changes the aspect of affairs."

It certainly did, in the days when men purloin, pilfer, embezzle and absorb other people's property as they did then and still do.

Visions of wealth once more began to roll across Harper's vision, and after a careful survey of the whole field he suddenly sat upright and rubbed his hands together.

"I guess Miriam Agnes Browning will be found within a year," he said, laughing. "I'll advertise for her, and I'll bet my ten thousand against a fox-skin that it will result more successfully than old Browning's efforts of long ago. After I've advertised for about three months or so I dare say a letter will arrive which will give some information of the lost heiress. My dear Harper, I see a golden future for you, after all."

CHAPTER VII.

COYOTE CLIFF.

ANY intelligent man who looked on Coyote Cliff, California, in the year of our story, would have been willing to wager his last dollar that it would never be deemed an earthly paradise,

and the miner who swung pick there for a while would be just as willing to stake his earnings against a blind mule that nobody would ever make a decent living there.

Yet, it had seen its gold flurry, and in the forsaken looking mountain bowl, a score of people still eked out a living, too lifeless and indolent to strike for better soil.

Once, a stage had rattled through Zephyr Pass, three times a week, but its rattle was no longer heard, and those who came and went had to do so through means of their own invention.

One afternoon, some weeks subsequent to the death of Silas Browning, two horsemen rode into Zephyr Pass with their faces toward Coyote Cliff.

These men were Thomas Harper and Cleon, the negro, and the latter shivered as he looked up at the black rocks which towered above them.

"Fore de Lord! sah, I's most afeerd ter ride fru here," said he.

"Why so?" Harper demanded. "You don't suppose that road-agent or red-skin would take root in such a place, do you?"

"No, sah, but it am dre'ful gloomy."

Harper did not answer, but he silently agreed with the negro and he was thinking busily.

"Old Huldah is a jewel. I told her to hide in the remotest place of the Sierra Nevada, and, surely, no place could be more out of the world than this. I wonder what sort of a girl my ward will be? She is a woman now, in years, but I doubt if she can even tell one letter from another. Old Huldah would not teach her, and in Coyote Cliff there are no pedagogues."

"I s'pose we'll see de young missy in 'bout an hour," said Cleon, who had no fancy for the darkness.

"Yes; at last, the heiress is near her fortune."

"It was dre'ful lucky your ad'tisement succeeded so wal."

"Yes, and it was providential, too. What a strange fortune has been Miriam's. As near as I can judge, she was stolen by persons who took her to sea, the vessel was lost, some kind soul tied the child to a box and gave it to the waves; it was found by the rude fishermen and carried to Portland, on the Columbia river, and there it has lived, cared for by a rough but kind-hearted woman, until five years ago, she came to Coyote Cliff. None of poor Miriam's protectors were reading persons, so they did not see Browning's advertisements, but, luckily, one Tom Trueaxe, a miner of Coyote Cliff, saw my own advertisement, and our Miriam was, or will be, restored to us by means of the garments she wore when she was a babe. That is the whole story in brief."

"You's done mighty wal to find her, Massa Harper!"

"It was Providence, Cleon, an overruling Providence. I was but an instrument thereof."

Mr. Harper looked upward with a far-away sort of expression on his face that made him resemble a country preacher among a small flock.

A little later, however, they emerged from Zephyr Pass and Coyote Cliff lay before them. A bleak, dismal-looking place, with dull brown rocks everywhere, with little water and not a sign of vegetation, but, still, the place they sought.

As they rode along a few miserable looking beings stared at them from wretched huts, and even Thomas Harper shuddered at the thought of a person, naturally intelligent, being compelled to live there for five years.

He inquired of one for the cabin of Tom Trueaxe, and then, bidding Cleon remain with the horses and watch them closely for he did not trust these Coyote people—they were either thieves or angels, that was certain—he went to the hut in question.

Entering without ceremony, he saw by a stone slab which answered for a table a man of middle age, and, by far, the most prepossessing looking person he had yet seen at the camp. He seemed to have been well-fed, and his features were not only keen but intelligent.

"You are Tom Trueaxe, I take it," said Harper.

"Right," admitted the man, tersely.

"Where is Huldah?"

The man suddenly sat erect and his sharp eyes looked his visitor over as one would scrutinize a blooded horse.

"Oh! he ejaculated. "I take it you are Tom Harper."

"I am," answered the visitor, disregarding the familiarity of the other.

"Wal, set down. Make yourself easy and I'll tell ye all about Huldah."

"Isn't she here?"

"No, an', ter ther best o' my knowledge, she never was. When last I see'd her, Coyote Cliff wasn't born; I ain't set eyes on her fur sixteen year, mister."

"Then why was I directed to inquire for you when I arrived at Coyote Cliff?"

"Because I am Huldah's business agent."

"How? Did you not say you had not seen her for sixteen years?"

"Yes," admitted Trueaxe, with a grin.

"See here, I want to feeling," said Harper,

impatiently. "If you know where the woman is, tell me at once; if not, I will seek further for what I wish to know."

"You'll look a long way afore you find Huldah. Wait; don't get mad. Wait a bit."

Trueaxe arose, went to a small trunk which stood at one side of the room and brought out paper, pens and ink—strange articles for Coyote Cliff. Then, upon the paper, he wrote a few words and handed the paper to his visitor.

"Thomas H. Harper, San Francisco."

Such were the words he had written, but it was at the penmanship which Harper stared in surprise.

"What does this mean?" he asked, a sudden change passing over his face.

"Simply that I have been the Huldah of your later years; that it was me who writ you all them letters—yas, every one you ever had."

A hot fury flamed in Harper's face and eyes. He knew there was a plot somewhere, but he did not yet see where exactly.

"Where, then, is the genuine Huldah?" he demanded.

"I have not seen or heard from her for over fifteen years," Trueaxe coolly said.

"And the—the girl—where is she?"

Harper had started to his feet, trembling with rage, fear and impatience, but the answer of the miner came as steadily as ever:

"I never saw the gal."

"Then, in Satan's name, what does all this mean? You have written the letters to me acknowledging the receipt of money I sent to Huldah, and yet you say you have not seen the old woman or the child for sixteen years. Explain."

"I will," said Trueaxe, placidly. "Sixteen year ago you hired old Huldah to steal a child o' two or three years, agreein' to give her a certain sum for the act and then to pay her so much per year fur takin' care of the child, the only restriction on her bein' that she should keep away from San Francisco and live in the loneliest places she could find. Am I right?"

Harper had once glanced out of the window, but, seeing Cleon where he had left him, he allowed the man to go on.

"Yes," he tersely said.

"Wal, now I'll show you how old Huldah kept her part of the compact. She come ter mean said that she wasn't goin' ter be bothered with no child, an' that she was goin' ter put it out o' the way; after which I could keep up a correspondence with you an' work the claim fur all it was worth."

"Trueaxe, was that child killed?" demanded Harper, his eyes blazing.

"Wait. You shall hear about that, bimeby. Wal, she did get rid of the child, an' then she went on one of her wanderin' journeys an' I ain't seen nor heard o' her sence. I, however, made up my mind ter work the claim as she said. I went to the north o' the State an' from there wrote you, signin' the name of Huldah Jackson, an' you sent me money 'cordin' ter agreement; an' ther business thus begun has been kept up fur sixteen year. To b'ile it down, Huldah an' the baby ain't received one penny o' your money, but you have kept a lazy cuss named Tom Trueaxe in bread an' butter like a lord."

The fellow smiled into Harper's face, but the latter sat overwhelmed by a realization of the gigantic fraud which had been carried on against him for a whole generation.

A little while thus, and then a murderous light shot into his eyes.

"You dog! You vile scoundrel!" he shouted. "I'll have your blood for this! I'll shoot—"

He had drawn a revolver from his pocket, resolved to carry out his threat, but he suddenly paused as Trueaxe thrust a like weapon against his very face.

"I'm one ahead o' ye, squire!" he grimly said. "Jest keep your shooter whar it is, fur I mean biz, an' ef you try to play rusty I'll drop you to stay. I've worked my mine until the gold has gi'n out, an' I don't care a continental."

Harper sunk back into his chair and cursed and foamed for awhile, but he had found that Trueaxe was his master with revolvers, or any other warlike weapons requiring quickness and experience.

"Now that you begin to cool off," said the latter, anon, "I don't mind givin' you a bit of a clew."

"What is it?" Harper surlily asked, suspecting another trick or trap.

"When Huldah put the baby away she tole me what she did with it."

"Ha! What did she say?"

"That she put it on the doorstep of one Lawrence Parmenter, who then lived in a town near the coast."

"Well, is he there now?"

"No."

"Do you know where he is?"

"Yes. He lives at Silver Spur, a mining-camp fifty miles south of here. He has been a judge since the old days, an' that's what they call him now, but he is at present runnin' a gold-mine at ther place I said."

"You seem to have kept track of him well."

"So I have."

"Why?"

"Because I reckoned you might some day come around, an' I wanted ter put ye on the track as a reward fur takin' your money fur all these years."

"Beware!" said Harper, sharply; "there is a trick here."

"Thar is not. I'll swear to all I say!" declared Trueaxe, earnestly.

"Well, tell your story."

"Hyar goes, straight an' true. Old Huldah put the baby on Parmenter's doorstep the night arter it was stole, an' when they heerd it yowl they took it in. They had two babies o' their own, gals an' twins, an' jest the size o' t'other one, an' their hearts warmed to the little stranger, an' the upshot on't was they resolved to adopt it. 'Bout a week arter that they moved som'ers else, an' when they got there they tole folks the children was all theirs, triplets, and so they growed up tergether, an' to this day nobody knows which is which, an' which ain't a Parmenter, except the jedge. His wife, yer see, died five year ago."

"I don't believe your story," said Harper, hotly.

"Wal, it's all one to me, but I kin sw'ar to it. I tell ye I've kept my eye on the Huldah baby in a ginereal sort o' a way."

"You say she has been brought up as Parmenter's own daughter?"

"Yas."

"And, of course, believes herself to be so?"

"Yas, ag'in."

"And that no one except Parmenter knows which of the three girls are his daughters and which one is not?"

"Exactly."

"Prove your statement," said Harper, irritably, as he lit a cigar to soothe his nerves.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON THE ROAD TO SILVER SPUR.

TOM TRUEAXE did not hesitate, but gave an account of how, through one means and another, he had kept the Parmenter family in hand for all those years. At the time the child was taken in by the judge, one Sarah Carr had been a servant in the family; she formed the first link; and a miner who had lately come from Silver Spur furnished the last.

Judge Parmenter still lived, as did the three girls, and as Sarah Carr had long been out of the family, and Mrs. Parmenter was dead, it was plain that only the judge himself could tell which one of the three was the doorstep waif.

While Trueaxe talked, Harper studied his face closely, and he ended by believing that the man was speaking with sincerity. Strange and improbable as the story might appear, Trueaxe unquestionably believed it.

"Well, this is a devil of a scrape," Harper growled, as his companion put in his last tit of evidence.

"It is aw'ard," Trueaxe acknowledged.

"How in Tophet am I to discover which of the children is the one I want?"

"Maybe, ther jedge will tell you."

"More likely he will not. If he cares enough for the girl to have kept her all these years, he will probably prefer to keep her still."

"I'm sorry fur you," said Trueaxe, soberly.

Harper turned on him in a sudden fury.

"Don't talk to me of pity, you infernal scoundrel! If I had my way, I would string you and old Huldah up to the nearest tree. She proved as treacherous as a snake, and you— you— Curse you! when I think how you have lived off of me all these years I feel like shootin' you!"

"I wouldn't, mister, ef I was you," said Trueaxe, carelessly cocking his revolver as though through curiosity. "Shootin' is like courtin'; it takes two parties ter make et a success. O' course it riles you a bit, but I have a sorer ter bear, too—my pension are cut off in my old age."

Trueaxe brushed away an imaginary tear, while Harper looked at him in sullen fury. He would have tried to shoot the fellow where he sat, but, luckily, he had sized him and knew that he was quicker on the trigger than himself.

"You orter be thankful," continued the expensioner, "that I didn't take any unfair advantage o' you. I might have hunted you up an' bled you by thousands instead of hundreds."

Harper started to his feet.

"Enough!" he said, sharply. "I am done with you, and, I hope, with Coyote Cliff. The air stifles me here; the place is like a tomb. I will go."

He strode from the hut without a word of farewell, but Tom Trueaxe looked after him with a smile.

"Mebbe you're done with me, an' mebbe you ain't. Et wouldn't be quar ef I should show up at Silver Spur to share in the spoils. We will see."

And Tom went back to his seat, took a drink of whisky, and, lighting his pipe, settled down to calmly consider the matter.

Meanwhile Cleon had been impatiently awaiting Harper's return. The gloom of Coyote Cliff made him nervous and oppressed. The wretched huts, with their more wretched occupants, affected him so much that he turned aside to look

at the face of Nature. Was it Nature that had fashioned the place? The bold, black hills of stone, canyon-cut and cliff worked, seemed like the desolation following an earthquake.

On the top of a high rock a buzzard sat and rested from his flight; it was the only sign of life visible beyond the huts.

Harper strode out and leaped into the saddle. "The girl is not here," he shortly said. "We have another journey before us."

His manner prevented Cleon from asking questions and they rode away in silence, but half-way through Zephyr Pass, his tongue unloosed and he told a story to suit himself. He had to blind even the negro, for Cleon had been devoted to Browning, and it would never do to let him suspect all that had occurred in the past.

They journeyed as fast as convenient toward Silver Spur, and when Ruggles's Bar was reached, Harper was glad to hear that he could take a stage to finish his journey. He was tired of saddle riding, and horses would be an incumbrance at the mining-camp to which they were going.

Accordingly, when Pete Hardy drove out of the Bar that day, Harper and Cleon went as passengers. They had two companions inside the stage, a pair of flashily-dressed young men whom Harper had no difficulty in analyzing. He had seen others of the kind in days of yore, and if they were not gamblers or swindlers of some kind, their looks were against them.

From the first they looked curiously at Harper, but it was some time before they broke in on his grim silence.

Their names soon appeared in their conversation, and were, if not aliases, Edward Ball and James Carter. They talked learnedly of mining matters, and might have caused an innocent person to think they were gold kings of California.

Finally one of them turned to Harper.

"Pardon, sir," he politely said, "but are you acquainted at Silver Spur?"

"I was never there," said Harper, tersely.

"Then I suppose you do not know much about the accommodations of the town?"

"Nothing," he was kind enough to answer.

"Do you think of investing in mining property?"

"No."

Harper looked straight at vacancy and tried to make his manner as forbidding as possible, but Ball was not a man to be easily baffled, though he did get somewhat angry and resolve to be revenged.

"It's a wild place there, I hear," he carelessly continued, "with a smart sprinkling of roughs, shooters and cut-throats in general. I suppose you go prepared for emergencies?"

"I suppose so."

The reply was vague, but Ball went on perseveringly:

"All you have to do is to drop your man, and the roughs will let you alone."

Harper changed his gaze so as to look squarely into Ball's face.

"Rest assured," he said, "that I shall drop my man if any one interferes with my business."

It was a very plain hint, and the glare which accompanied it disconcerted the young man, and he relapsed into silence; but Carter took up the thread of conversation and began to boast of his skill with revolver and knife, throwing in a bit of autobiographical reminiscence, which seemed to establish his reputation as a remarkably dangerous man.

Ball joined in the chorus, and they were in the midst of a panorama of bloody victories when the stage suddenly halted, nearly throwing all from their feet.

The flashy young men began to swear, but Cleon, looking from the window, started visibly.

"Fore de Lord, dar's a lot ob men out dar wid pistols a-p'intin' at de driver!" he said.

Ball and Carter started in turn.

"Road-agents!" uttered the former, nervously.

Harper took a look for himself, and saw the same sight that had disturbed Cleon.

"You are right," he quietly said. "We are beset by armed men, and now that I think of it, I remember that I was told that one Captain Nevada lords it over this trail. Come, gentlemen, out with your revolvers."

The speaker resolutely drew his own weapons.

"Don't do it!" cried Ball, hastily.

"Why not?"

"They will kill us if we resist."

"If we resist? Why, do you intend to let those infernal thieves go through you?"

"I tell you it is death to resist. Put up your revolver and take it coolly, and all will be well, but if we resist them, the Lord only knows what they will do."

Harper looked at the shaking pair with undisguised scorn.

"And you are the two who were boasting of your courage and invincibility but a moment ago?" he cried with sarcasm. "You are coyotes in lions' skins; confound it, you are cowards! Do you hear me?"

They heard, but neither had the backbone to

resent the charge. They were brave enough when plucking a stranger in the depraved Rome of their trade, or in working against men with the odds in their favor; but to oppose a gang of road-agents was not to their liking.

The stage-door was jerked open, and Captain Nevada, handsome of feature and gay of dress as usual, appeared at the opening, a careless smile on his face.

Harper eyed him as a caged tiger looks from his bars; but in this case the fighting man of the stage had his revolver ready for use.

"Give you good-evening and a warm greeting, sir pilgrims," said the robber, cheerfully. "I've dropped around for toll. Just chuck out your purses, jewels, and dead-head railroad-tickets, per order Captain Nevada."

Before any one could answer, there was a shout outside, the report of a revolver, followed by others in rapid succession, and Nevada sprang away from the door.

Harper thrust out his head and saw a burly man on a small horse charging through the road-agents, firing a revolver with each hand, and yelling like mad.

The sight thrilled the heiress-seeker, and he burst open the stage-door with a vigorous kick.

"A diversion in our favor, gents!" he shouted. "Follow me, and we will yet win the match!"

CHAPTER IX.

SAWTOOTH SAM.

HARPER leaped out of the stage, followed by Cleon, who still retained a belligerent nature, despite his gray hairs.

The unknown man was dealing death and destruction as he rode, as was shown by several hard-hit men on the ground, and his revolvers worked with machine-like regularity; but just as Harper became fairly ready for work, one of the outlaws shot the horse, and the rider only saved himself by an agile leap.

His chances looked poor then, but Harper and Cleon sprung into the melee and began firing rapidly. Both of them knew how to use their weapons, and the affair waxed warm.

Suddenly a whistle rung out on the air, and at the sound the robbers scattered. None of their opponents exactly understood the order in which they had gone, but they went with quickness and certainty, and the people of the stage were left masters of the situation.

The driver, lying flat on the seat to make himself as inconspicuous as possible, had aided in the good work; and when the last enemy had gone, Ball and Carter were seen on the ground, flourishing their revolvers and howling for more warfare; but it is a significant fact that their weapons required no reloading.

What was mortal of two robbers lay on the ground, and the hero of the fight, the stranger, was trying to coax a little life back into his fallen steed—a useless undertaking.

"Durn their skins!" he suddenly exclaimed, standing erect, "they've busted my hoss right in ther brain, an' he is down ter stay. A hundred good dollars gone canterin' ter ther happy huntin'-grounds an' no equivalent ter fill ther gap. Sampson was a good boss, an' ther silent pardner in ther firm o' Sawtooth Sam & Co. Ther firm is hyarby dissolved without our mutual consent. Sampson can't vote in ther case, one way er nuther. Why can't Sampson vote? 'Cause he is gone whar good hosses go."

The speaker sat down on a rock, muffled his head in a blanket and seemed to give himself up to mourning.

Harper looked sharply around to make sure that the road-agents were really gone, and then looked at the mourner with interest. He was a stout, rugged man, with nothing to distinguish him from the average miner. His garments were old and none too clean, his hair and beard ample and bushy, while over his shoulders he wore a dingy blanket which now served to hide his face.

The stage driver had lighted his pipe, and, lying lazily on the box, was calmly smoking.

He now raised his musical voice.

"I opine we had better move on, ef ther circus is over," he said, "an' ef that pilgrim is bound fur ther Spur, he had better unriver his eyes an' pile on somewhar."

"You are right, my friend," said Harper, starting.

He then approached Sawtooth Sam, as the man had called himself, and touched him on the shoulder.

"Get into the stage and I will make it all right, my man," he said, kindly.

The miner cast off his blanket but did not arise.

"Sad is my heart an' black ther sky," he said, mournfully. "Sampson is gone an' I am left alone, a widow an' an orphan. But I allays knowed Sampson would not live ter be old. Why would he? Beca'se ther gifted are always cut off in ther youth."

"Never mind, my friend. I will myself purchase you a new horse."

"Don't s'pose you could give me a drink, could ye?"

Harper promptly produced a flask and the "widowed" man drank long and steadily.

"I say," called out the driver, "I am opposed ter stoppin' ther mill till ther grist is ground, an' I would like ter land ye all in Silver Spur as soon as possible; but ef ther court is bound ter take a session, s'posia' you give me a nail for my coffin."

"Finish it," said Harper, passing up the flask, "and then let us all go on."

He spoke impatiently and half pulled Sawtooth Sam within the coach, after which Pete Hardy gathered up the reins, cracked his whip and they resumed their way.

Evidently the whisky had had a cheering effect upon Sawtooth Sam. He mourned no longer, but talked so much that the others could find place for but few remarks.

He, too, was going to Silver Spur as a stranger, but he was loud in his assertions that a golden future awaited him. There was gold to be had for the digging, and he intended to dig.

Harper was not particularly pleased with him, for the reason that he talked too much and boasted too loudly, but over his mouth of braggadocio ran a bright thread of good-humor which relieved its unpleasantness; and none of them could fail to understand that his fighting had saved them from Captain Nevada.

When near the village, Pete paused to allow his horses to drink, and Harper improved the chance to climb to a seat on the box.

Thus it was that, as they passed two young ladies at the edge of the line of houses, Harper had a good look and at once grew interested.

Pete waved his whip in greeting, and his passenger hastened to speak.

"Who are they?"

"Dorters o' Judge Parmenter," answered the driver, who had not forgotten his drink from the flask. "Helen an' Millicent are their names, an' they hev got a mate o' the same kind. Ther old jedge has got what I call a consolidated fam'ly—only three 'sides hisself, an' they are gals an' triplets at that."

It was a very favorable opening and Harper improved it by asking numerous questions, all of which Pete answered, but without placing his passenger any nearer to the great object which had brought him to Silver Spur.

"Ther three are as much alike as three peas," said Pete, "an' I doubt 'f ther jedge knows which is Helen, or which is t'other one till they tell him."

Unluckily for the peace of the young ladies, the men on the box were not the only ones who saw them.

Ball and Carter had not been blind. They had seen the girls and noted their beauty, and with the freedom of their lawless natures, had removed their hats in what they meant for gallantry; but Helen and Millicent moved serenely on without returning the greeting.

"By George! here's a find," said Ball. "Two as pretty girls as mountain air ever produced. Shoot me if I don't have some fun before I leave the town."

Carter was of the same way of thinking, and, not considering Cleon or Sawtooth Sam worthy of notice, they allowed their tongues full sway.

The stage halted in front of the Alexis Hotel and the face of the landlord beamed with delight as the travelers unloaded. Such a winfall had not come to his place before since it was opened.

Harper soon took himself to his private room, for he wanted a chance to rest and reflect. He had entered upon what might prove a difficult work, if Judge Parmenter did not see fit to make a confession, and then, too, Cleon must be hoodwinked.

He had thus far told a multitude of lies to hide his crime of the past and his crooked dealing of the present, for though the negro had apparently accepted all he said as strictly true, he had for the Brownings a devotion which did not extend to Thomas Harper.

Their kindness of feeling was only surface deep.

Lighting a cigar, Harper sat down by the window where he could look out on the one street of the village, and, soon after, the entrance of a Mexican-looking man to the hotel was followed by the sound of voices in the adjoining room.

This was the interview between Miguel Perez and Persis Ripley, after the former had put poison in the liquor at Otis Sprague's cabin; but Harper was not sufficiently interested to play the eavesdropper.

His own affairs were too important for him to meddle with those of others.

The conversation soon ceased, but, just as it was growing dusk, Harper saw a woman closely veiled, leave the hotel and walk toward the east.

CHAPTER X.

A MYSTERIOUS SHOT.

CANYON DAVE and Otis Sprague were returning from their day's work in a contented mood. Their luck had been good and gold had been found, while Otis, at least, had another cause for joy. He had been able to render valuable assistance to the woman he loved, and he would have been more than human had he not hoped that he would win fresh favor by his rescue of

Edna Parmenter from the hands of Captain Nevada.

They reached their cabin, sat down and made a hearty supper off their plain food.

"I reckon we will be able to live in better style after a few months at Silver Spur," said Otis.

"I hope so," replied Dave, "for, to be frank, I am getting tired of wild life. I began it at fifteen, and I've kept it up ever since. I have been about everything that a man can be in the West, and I was never more contented than when I was hunting grizzlies up in the mountains; but now I feel as though I would like to get rich and plant my picket-pin in a more civilized place."

"Shall I tell you why?" Otis asked, smiling: "Go on."

"You have seen 'Gus Hackett.'"

Sprague seemed to think his words sufficient, but the mountaineer did not answer at once. He sat with his hand shading his face, looking steadily at vacancy, but, at last, he looked with a grave but friendly expression.

"And you have seen Edna Parmenter," he replied, slowly. "We understand each other, Sprague, but it's a long step ahead. I have always despised the weakness which acknowledges presentiments, but, somehow, I feel as though there was trouble ahead for me, at least."

"Nonsense! Your case is better than mine. You love a girl comparatively poor, like yourself; while I, beggar that I am, worship a rich man's daughter. The case demands medical treatment, therefore let us imbibe."

Upon the table stood a flask of whisky, an article always necessary in a wild country. They kept it for emergencies, but Sprague believed the present case of that nature.

Had he known, however, that Miguel Perez had been in the cabin and poisoned the stuff, he would have been less eager to drink.

He lifted the flask and held it above his head between them.

"Lacking glasses, we will use the stuff without recourse to form. Take it, Canyon Dave, and drink to our success."

He extended the flask, but at that moment there was a dull report and a crash of glass, and the flask fell to pieces in his hand and went in fragments to the table, over which the whisky had already run.

Both men started to their feet, and stood gazing in amazement at the ruin, but they knew well enough that it had been caused by a bullet fired through the door; and Canyon Dave suddenly snatched a revolver from his belt and darted from the cabin.

Not a person was visible.

He made a circuit of the cabin, and then returned to the door, laughing as he saw Sprague.

"Did you get him?" the latter asked.

"Didn't see a sign."

"Then, what are you laughing at?"

"The joke, my dear fellow. Of course that bullet was not intended for us—which would be a serious affair—but for just the purpose it accomplished. Some fellow of a playful turn of mind played a trick on us."

"We lost a half a pint of whisky by it," said Sprague, struggling between anger and amusement. "Suppose you break your leg to-morrow?"

"Oh! confound the whisky! Cold water is just as good!"

They turned to re-enter the cabin, when Dave's sharp eyes saw something new. A bit of white paper fluttered from the wall beside the door, and when he saw that it was pinned by a knife, it began to assume business-like proportions.

He carried it to the light and saw these words, evidently hastily written, for they were but a scrawl:

"Are you mad? Do not drink that stuff unless you want to die. It is poisoned, and one draught would kill you. Take heed to your going and coming, and keep your cabin locked, or your lives will be taken by the powerful enemies you have at Silver Spur. I am obliged to make this letter anonymous, but you shall some day know me, and acknowledge that I am,
YOUR FRIEND."

The men finished reading together, and then looked at each other questioningly.

"Comments are in order," said Canyon Dave.

"Well, part of it is plain enough, providing that it was poisoned. We have an unknown friend who has saved our lives, but I don't know who that friend is. Again, it may be all a joke upon us from first to last, and—"

Sprague paused suddenly, for a woman had darted through the door, flung herself at Dave's feet, and caught his hand.

"Save me! save me!" she cried, wildly.

Dave drew a revolver, while his friend, with a pair ready for use, strode to the door.

"What's the riot, miss?" asked the mountaineer, somewhat amused at the dramatic feature of the case.

"A man! a dreadful man!" shivered the lady, nervously caressing his hand.

"I'm another, miss; but if you think the other the worse of the two, I'll try to keep him off my claim."

At this moment Sprague turned his head.

"There ain't man nor woman, chick nor child, in sight," he said.

"Then he has taken to flight," said the woman, arising, and revealing the face of Persis Ripley. "He pursued me until I ran into your cabin, and—and I was dreadfully frightened."

She leaned heavily upon the mountaineer, but he was not visibly affected. He had not seen life all the way from Puget's Sound to the Gulf of California without learning to read human nature; and one glance was enough to brand the woman an adventuress. She might have been frightened as she said, but the possibility that she told the truth failed to arouse his chivalry.

"You're safe now, at any rate," he coolly said. "My friend is a bad man in a fight, and if your enemy reappears, I venture to say he will get his teeth knocked out."

"I think he was one of Captain Nevada's men," Persis faintly added.

"Confound those fellows! they ought to be exiled from Silver Spur!" said Canyon Dave, frowning, and, releasing himself from Persis, he raised and lowered the hammer of his revolver several times in succession. "Do you see a cloud of dust, pard?"

The last inquiry was addressed to Sprague, who was plainly shocked at this show of levity.

"There is no one in sight," he said, "and your persecutor probably hastened to get into his den as soon as he saw you seek our cabin."

"At the same time," said Dave, with a sudden idea in his head, "he may be lurking near. Let me unfold a plan and we may catch him yet. You, Sprague, shall walk home with this lady, while I will skulk along in the rear, and if any disturber appears, out goes his headlight."

This plan was executed, though no one seemed to feel much zeal in the case. Sprague escorted Persis to the Alexis Hotel, with Dave for a rear guard, but no enemy appeared and the trip was quite monotonous.

Plainly, all three were busy thinking, however.

Once in her room, Persis sunk into a chair and her face assumed a look of fury.

"He laughed at me!" she hissed; "he dared to laugh at me!"

There was something in her speech which was like the play of a deadly serpent's tongue, and her face was pale from anger which almost choked her. As she sat there, shivering as from cold, her nails cutting her white hands, she gave the impression that Canyon Dave might yet be sorry that he had laughed.

"I could have killed him when he so coolly put me on that thick-headed Sprague, and on my revolver was still the smoke of the shot which had saved his life. I almost wish now that I had allowed Miguel Perez to have his way, and poison them both. But no, no! I will give him one more chance. Ay, I will make him care for me as I care for him—I swear it!"

Meanwhile Otis had been lecturing his friend at the door, and even Dave's positive assertion that the woman was an adventuress failed to wholly quiet his partner's conscience.

They returned to the discussion of the mysterious shot and equally mysterious letter.

Sprague was inclined to think the whole affair a practical joke, but Dave took the matter up more vigorously.

"I believe that it is somebody's scheme to gain our favor. At any rate, that note was deliberately written. The scrawl was a disguise. Is it likely any one would stand outside the door in the darkness and write so lengthy an epistle? No, it was written in advance."

"Which goes to show that it was all a practical joke," interrupted Sprague.

"It can be used as a strong argument in that direction, but I incline to my expressed theory. Some one is playing a deep game, and the cloven-hoof will show sooner or later. Just keep your eyes open and see. All things have a meaning, and so has our adventure of to-night."

CHAPTER XI.

A SURPRISE FOR CANYON DAVE.

CANYON DAVE had argued with considerable force and correctness, but even philosophers frequently fall short in their intellectual flights. Beginning well, the mountaineer failed to connect Persis Ripley with the events which had preceded her arrival, while toward her he felt an indifference which was hardly to his credit.

He had shrewdly suspected that her alarm over the mysterious man who had pursued her was not wholly sincere, and he should have known and remembered that when a woman of the world does that which is not natural to her she usually has a scheme of some sort in mind.

Being so near to the bar-room of the Alexis, Otis proposed that they enter, and they passed within, found seats and dropped into them to watch the crowd.

Business was good that night, and the red-faced and stalwart miners threw away their dust in mutual "treats" with the recklessness of men who are doing well financially.

There was gold about the village, and the saloons received the principal benefit.

Besides the common patrons, there were some men who wore good clothes, strangers and otherwise. At one table Ball and Carter were

playing cards with two men of Mexican appearance; Thomas Harper leaned against the wall and curiously surveyed the scene, while he was in turn closely observed by Miguel Perez, who had thus far failed to perceive Dave and Otis.

Finally the Mexican approached the man from San Francisco and nodded pleasantly.

"You do not play, senior," he said, waving his hand at the various tables.

"Not for small stakes," said Harper, carelessly.

"Ah!" murmured Miguel, softly. "What do you consider one worth playing for?"

"Life!" said his companion, calmly. "It is a game we all play, even from our cradles, and the moves are numerous. We should play carefully, too, for our opponent, Death, never sleeps and never misses a chance. It's a grand battle, sir, for the man who wins does so against great odds."

"Ah—h!" breathed Miguel. "You are a—what do you call it?—feelosopher, I think. You look beneath the surface and see the blood under the cuticle."

"I wish I could," muttered Harper.

"Pardon, senior."

"I was only thinking aloud."

"And you never play?"

"Not with cards. Miniature battles are not to my liking. What will you take?"

It was a question which has bridged over many a difference of opinion, and the two stood up at the bar to drink and be merry.

Sawtooth Sam entered the room, glanced around, and finally sat down beside the table where Ball and Carter were throwing pasteboards, with varying fortune.

It was the old saloon scene, but one destined to become of Western liveliness before the evening was through.

Neither Canyon Dave nor Sprague indulged in gambling, but they watched so closely that anon the former discovered that some one had dropped a folded note into his lap while he sat so still, and then gone his way unseen.

He unfolded it curiously and read as follows:

"DAVID CANTON:—"

"So far all is well. You have kept your part of the compact and I will keep mine. I did not call you from the mountains on an aimless errand; there is better game in Silver Spur than grizzlies—but I must have time. If you want to see me, come to the rear of the hotel at once. INCOGNITO."

The mountaineer seemed far more interested than surprised, and as the last word was read, glanced at Sprague almost guiltily; but the latter was looking away and had not seen the note.

Dave thrust it in his pocket and then touched his friend on the arm.

"I am going out for a minute; wait for me here," he said.

Sprague answered carelessly, and the mountaineer passed from the saloon and strode around toward the rear. The night was dark, but as he reached the designated spot he saw a tall man in a cloak and wide hat.

Dave paused, and they looked at each other closely.

"Whom do you want?" asked the tall man, in a deliberate but harsh voice.

"Incognito," was the answer.

"I am he."

"Then, in heaven's name—"

Canyon Dave had begun impetuously, but the unknown put out one hand to interrupt him.

"Wait," he said, in the same deliberate way.

"Let us talk calmly. I am the same person who once before addressed you, who drew you from the land where you hunted grizzlies and was as gallant, I dare say, as any veteran there; I am the person who bade you come to Silver Spur if you would learn one thing regarding the past. I am Incognito."

"Yes, yes, that much is plain; but now I want light on the subject. I am not a child to be kept in the dark. Deal with me as man to man. Lead me to—"

"Not yet," Incognito interrupted.

"And why not?" David fiercely demanded.

"Because I cannot. I do not now know where she is, but am sure she is concealed in or about this place, and I swear that you shall yet see her, provided you do as I told you and not let even your best friend know why you are in Silver Spur."

"This secrecy is childish!" the mountaineer said, instinctively fingering his revolver.

"Be calm!"

"Don't talk to me of calmness. You know how much is at stake, and you can't expect me to be a clod. Come, sir, be manly. Tell me all you know about this matter."

"I decline."

"When shall I know?"

"Perhaps never."

"By heaven, I may speedily succeed in unclosing your lips!" the young man cried, hotly.

"How?"

"Thus!"

Canyon Dave snatched his revolver from his belt and presented it at the breast of the unknown, but the latter calmly folded his arms across his breast.

"We can die but once," he coolly said, "and life is only the bridge between the cradle and

the grave. Fire if you will, but remember one thing, to which I solemnly swear—the shot that ends my existence forever cuts off the hopes in your mind."

The mountaineer dropped his hand.

"Why do you torture me?" he asked.

"I have not intended it. I came here to-night so that you might see me and know that Incognito was something more than a shadow. I came and found you hot-blooded, like all of your years. I trifled with you to teach you patience. Now, my young fire-eater, now I will torture you before I am through!"

"Sneering devil!" cried David, scarcely able to keep his hands from his companion.

"Excellent! excellent; go on—what more?"

The young man did not answer at once. Instead, he struggled with his temper, and when he spoke it was with calmness.

"I am in your power; do with me as you will," he said. "If you are human, you can not wonder at my emotions, but from to-night I await your will as stoically as I have done in the past. You can win my blessing, if you will—provided you are as powerful as you say, which I do not doubt—and that must be some satisfaction."

The strange man laughed harshly.

"Not a particle," he declared. "Blessings and curses are alike of no consequence to me. I scorn the world; I love only myself; I do not waste any thoughts on a life to come; and I dare say you would be amazed to see what a long list of crimes I could recall."

Dave was not a carpet-knight and ten years of wild life had made him nearly invulnerable to useless emotions, but he actually shuddered at the stranger's words and his mind went back to Mephistopheles.

"Well, what are my orders for the future?"

"You are to wait, as before."

"For how long?"

"As long as I see fit."

Canyon Dave bit his lip fiercely. He would have given much to throttle this insolent and sneering stranger, but the deed would imbitter all his future life.

"Very well," he calmly said.

"Now, will you go with me?" continued Incognito.

"Where?"

"Where I lead."

"Yes," said the mountaineer, sharply. "Lead on, even though it be to the den of Captain Nevada."

"Why do you mention him?"

"Well, he is supposed to have an itching after human hide and hair in a general sort of a way, and, to-day, I had a little encounter with him which will naturally make him pant to perforate me in particular."

"Did you quarrel? Tell me about it."

By this time the two strangely assorted companions were walking rapidly along between the street and the southern cliffs; and as they went Dave told of the rescue of Edna Parmenter from the outlaw's hands.

Dead silence followed his conclusion, for Incognito said not a word by way of comment, and in this unsocial way they left the village behind them.

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT THE NIGHT BROUGHT FORTH.

THE strange guide did not go further east than the line of cabins stretched, but turned to the left and strode on as before.

Canyon Dave, however, grew interested. Their faces were toward Camel's Hump and the lair of Captain Nevada, and he almost suspected Incognito was taking him at his word and leading him to the rodd-agents' cave.

They crossed the open space and entered the small wood. There all was dark, and Dave held his revolvers ready, but the guide went on in utter silence, and they soon stood on open ground again.

At this point the guide turned and looked back toward the village. Silver Spur lay below them, silent, and, except for the lights from the few saloons, dark. Little was there about the town to attract one seeking for amusement, and it had never yet had a genuine Western feud and battle.

As they stood thus, Dave thought of Sprague and wondered what he would think of his absence. What passed in Incognito's mind is less easily told. His hat was pulled low over his eyes, his cloak crept up to meet it, and the mountaineer had long before given up the attempt to see his features.

So far as he knew, the guide's color might be either white, black or red, or a mixture of all.

At last the guide turned away.

"Come!" he briefly said.

They went on, and in a few minutes Canyon Dave grew freshly interested, for they were nearing the cabin of Brad Hackett. He did not imagine they were going to call there, but he always thought of 'Gus with interest.

He found he had been mistaken, however, when they paused a few yards from the door.

The cabin stood in the shadow of three tall trees which arose just behind it, and bushes and rocks were everywhere abundant. It was a

place of unusual beauty, for the vicinity, but it was 'Gus who had selected it with the judgment of a clever woman.

"Now," continued Incognito, "you will secrete yourself in this thicket and remain until I return. This is a land of strange occurrences, and by watching sharply you may see something of interest. Do not fall asleep, but use your eyes, see what is worth seeing and hear all you can. Keep your gaze for the most part on the door, but watch the bushes and the rocks."

This plan irritated the mountaineer afresh, but, remembering his resolve to be patient, he only asked if mystery was absolutely necessary in this case.

"Mystery is always necessary," was the sharp reply. "Even the world and the space about it is a mystery. Do you agree?"

"Certainly. Here I rest, as directed."

"Very well. Wait patiently."

There was a rustling of the bushes and the strange man was gone.

Canyon Dave watched until all sounds made by his departure had died away, and then sat down with his back to a rock and his rifle between his knees. He was screened by the bushes, but they were of a nature which gave him a chance to watch well while himself concealed from view.

The night was dark and silent—to him it seemed unnaturally quiet. He was most peculiarly placed. He had a strong, self-reliant nature, but because he had a great purpose to accomplish he was obeying the mysterious Incognito in a manner most cutting to one of his ways.

Who and what was the unknown? It was a question the miner could not answer; but it was certain that he held, or claimed to hold, a secret worth more than gold to Canyon Dave.

Perhaps he was but an impostor, perhaps he had lured him there for purposes of assassination. But no, the suspicion was not plausible; no one except the unknown knew why he had come to Silver Spur, and it was he who had called him there.

David threw off his reflective mood and looked more keenly about him. The rocks and bushes were silent and dark, but a light showed through the windows of Brad's house. Curtains prevented a clear view, for 'Gus had introduced that feature of civilization, but he knew Brad and his daughter were there.

He looked wistfully at the cabin. It would have been far more to his taste to have been behind the curtains, with 'Gus, than crouching like a dog on guard at the door.

The last fancy, however, pleased him. It would be pleasant to act as the protector of the girl, and he was not sure but what a dog, blessed with her favor, would be an enviable object.

There is something very pleasant about being the protector of a pretty girl.

At last the mountaineer turned his eyes away. His thoughts were running riot; they must be curbed.

He fixed his gaze intently on a rock a dozen yards away, but he had not looked long when it seemed to him that the rock was in motion.

He rubbed his eyes, but the suspicion grew into a certainty, and as he had never witnessed such a geological phenomenon about Silver Spur before, he partially arose.

Then the truth flashed upon him; the rock had not moved, but something had intervened between it and himself, and that something was still creeping along, his course toward the cabin.

Dave flashed a quick glance around, and as he did so he saw other objects moving, and one, which was near him, assumed the shape of a man.

He had seen enough to bring him out of his indolent attitude, and enough to arouse his liveliest apprehensions.

Why were these men thus creeping toward Brad Hackett's cabin?

"There's mischief afoot, but I will foil them," he grimly thought. "Once put Brad on his guard and they will find him a hard customer, and I'll do what I can in the rear."

He waited further developments. The men, who seemed to be a dozen in number, gathered near the cabin-door, and seemed to consult; but Canyon Dave smiled as he thought how he would foil their plans of secrecy.

In the midst of it all, however, there was a thundering crash against the door, followed by a dull thud, and then dead silence for a moment; but the mountaineer understood that a stone had been hurled against the door, and, believing it a trick to call Brad out, he concluded that it was time to make himself heard.

Raising his revolver, he fired four shots into the air in succession, every one ringing out with startling clearness. Had he been certain that the prowlers were really there with evil intentions, they would have been the target.

His movement removed the last doubt. A bitter curse arose from the group of men, and they hurled themselves against the door with a force which made the cabin shake.

Canyon Dave waited for no more, but, bringing up his rifle, he sent a bullet hurtling into the confused mass of human beings, and then began to use his revolvers.

He was afraid that Brad would open the door, but the miner did nothing of the kind.

Instead, his voice speedily arose from some unknown quarter like a young cyclone.

"What in thunder has broke loose? Git out o' my door-yard!"

The command was not needed. The men, whoever they were, had had enough of war, and already they were in retreat, carrying off one or two men who seemed to be killed or desperately wounded.

Then the door was flung open, and Brad appeared, rifle in hand. David ran forward, shouting his name.

"Eternal thunder! what is ther riot?" the miner demanded. "Has Cap'n Nevada tuk ter ther war-path, or is thar an 'arthquake?"

"I only know you have enemies about, sir. You had better close and bolt the door," advised Dave, who gained the interior of the cabin.

"Nary close. I'm goin' out ter shoot an' kill promisc'us— Hello!"

The veteran broke off short as 'Gus caught him by the arm, whirled him to one side, and secured the door.

Brad was looking at her as though amazed at her audacity, but she only laughed in his face.

"Stand right where you are," she said lightly.

"Curfew must not ring to-night."

"It would be ringin' with a rattle that would raise King Solomon ef you hadn't countermanded ther order. How dar'd you sling me round so premiscuous—how dar'd ye, I say?"

"Now just behave while you're before strangers. Don't force me to explain that your life is not insured. But, Mr. Dave, what is the trouble outside?"

Daughter and father both dropped their air of pleasantry and seemed somewhat anxious.

"I am a good deal in the dark myself," said the mountaineer. "I was—I was—I chanced to be passing when I saw them stealing on the cabin in a mischievous way, and so helped to beat them off."

Dave had barely saved himself from accidentally confessing that he had been hiding in the bushes, and his narrow escape caused a little stammering; but some questioning brought out a clearer version.

"That dornick bus'ness beats me," said Brad, caressing his beard. "I don't b'lieve ons on 'em critters fired it. Why should they? All a man has got ter do is ter rap on ther door, an' I'm thar right soon; an' then ag'in, ther door is never barred till I go ter bed. Et rather seems ter me that ther stun was chucked by an outsider. Didn't see no other two-legged critter 'round, did yer?"

CHAPTER XIII.

CANYON DAVE ON GUARD.

THE mountaineer did not answer at once, for the remarks of Brad Hackett had started a fresh train of thought. Was it Incognito who had sounded the first alarm? If so, it was not in keeping with his avowed nature; but the suspicion once started, David felt almost sure it was so.

Otherwise, why had he led him to the cabin—why had he placed him in such a position and bade him watch the vicinity closely?

"By George!" he thought, "I believe, it was he who hurled the warning stone against the door. I reckon he is not so bad as he pretends."

His wandering thoughts were recalled as Brad repeated his question; but as he had promised to say nothing in regard to the unknown, he was obliged to declare that he had seen no one except the assailants.

"I reckon they was Cap'n Nevada's men, but I hev never trod on ther toes," said the miner, as though he failed to see why they should make an attack; but he turned his gaze toward 'Gus as he ceased speaking, and thought more than he said.

The girl was pretty enough to attract any man; it would not be strange if the lord of Camel's Hump had seen and admired her.

Brad reflected a little, and then took his rifle and went out to make sure that the assailants had really deserted the vicinity.

Canyon Dave turned to 'Gus. He would have spoken words of cheer, but he saw that she was as cool as himself.

"I am afraid your cabin will hardly be safe in such an exposed locality, now Captain Nevada is on the road," he said.

"We are not afraid of him," she said, with the even calmness of one naturally brave.

"Our cabin is not an egg-shell. Look at the door. It is very thick and strong, and with the bars in place can not be forced from its hinges. The same may be said of the windows, with their stout blinds on the inside. I laughed at father when he built our castle, but he was pleased to say that he was going to defend his one ewe lamb. It was an infringement on poetry which alarmed me, and I insisted on bathing his head at once, but the mental derangement soon passed."

During this long address, the mountaineer had been watching his companion's fair face, and he, too, began to show symptoms of mental excitement. Her large, sparkling eyes seemed to him like stars, her rosy cheeks like a glorious

sunset, her teeth like bars of sunshine through the clouds.

He knew he was wandering, but the hallucination was a pleasant one.

"I admire Brad's taste," he said, removing his hat. "He couldn't worship at a fairer shrine."

"You wicked wretch!" said 'Gus, severely.

"To err is human, to forgive is—"

"Folly," she interrupted, laughing. "Come, my gallant soldier, you forget that your revolvers are not loaded. Better attend to such every-day affairs first of all. Were you so forgetful when with the grizzlies?"

"When I did forget, they reminded me of the fact with the same cruelty you have just shown," he answered, with assumed sorrow.

They were still talking when Brad returned. "Gone, all gone," said the miner, placing his rifle against the wall. "The wicked flee when nobody chases them."

"More Scripture," said 'Gus, elevating her brows. "Really, something is wrong in the atmosphere. I think there is an opening for a physician at Silver Spur."

"Jedgin' by ther pool o' blood them varmints left by ther door, I should say a surgeon might get one job, at least. Kenyon Dave, you hit 'em hard. Yer eye is stiddy an' yer hand firm."

Two hours passed on, but the assailants came no more. Brad had a loophole at each side of the cabin, and from these he took frequent looks, but all remained quiet.

The hour for retiring had come, but none of them felt like trusting all to chance. Accustomed as they were to wild life, they could not prevent a feeling that danger still menaced them. There was a vague uneasiness on their faces even while they talked lightly.

Canyon Dave had fallen into thought, deep, and at first troubled. After all that time he had suddenly remembered Incognito and the injunction he had given when he left him in the thicket.

He had been directed to remain until the unknown returned, but he had forgotten and disobeyed the order. What would be the result? If Incognito really intended to return, he would doubtless vent his temper in some way; but remembering his theory that it was he who had given the alarm, David was inclined to think he had previously known of the intended attack, had brought him there to thwart it, and that their night's companionship then terminated.

"I believe that is it; I believe Incognito is not so bad as he seems."

"Go on," said 'Gus; "let us hear the rest."

The mountaineer started.

"Did I speak aloud?" he asked.

"Hardly, but you muttered to yourself."

"A relic of grizzly hunting. Don't mind me."

"I have an idee," said Brad.

"Let us hear it."

"I'm not goin' ter sleep ther sleep o' ther fool, ter-night. That's that in my bones that tells me ther danger ain't over, but we'll hide our light under a bushel an' bait ther enemy. When they see ther castle grow dark they'll think we are in bed an' come out o' their holes. See?"

"I do, and to help you, let me go out and make a tour of the vicinity. I may see something of interest."

They talked further, and then the door and windows were secured, and the light extinguished. Brad and 'Gus sat and talked, but they were alone; David had been barred out instead of in.

For a long time he lay beneath the window through which he had gone, and then he arose and crept to the shadow of the rocks.

The night was not so dark as before. In places the clouds were growing thin, and though there was no moon, it was necessary to use some caution.

Dave went up the mountain side for several minutes, and then paused where he was well concealed by the rocks, and looked down. Peace and quiet seemed over the whole vicinity, and the light of the Alexis Hotel twinkled as though coaxing him to return.

He thought of Sprague, but soon put the subject away, and seated on a bowlder, began to think of the matter which had brought him to Silver Spur.

While thus engaged a fragment of earth fell at his feet. Moving only his head, he looked upward quickly. A rock twenty feet high was at his back. When he sat down it had been bare and deserted, but life had suddenly made itself manifest.

At the rock's edge stood a man who was leaning on his rifle and looking fixedly toward the valley. He looked burly and muscular, but nothing more could be discovered then.

Having no desire to encounter him, Dave remained motionless, and, at the end of five minutes, the man turned away and disappeared. Silence followed his departure and the mountaineer, believing he had left the vicinity, soon forgot the circumstance.

It was recalled, however, in a most vivid fashion.

He was still seated on the bowlder where, without the least warning, a heavy weight was

precipitated upon him and he fell to the earth like a log, his rifle falling from his grasp.

It was an awkward mishap, but Dave thought clearly while falling. The weight was not that of a rock; he had experienced no actual harm from its first attack; and it followed that it must be either a man or a wild beast.

He struck on his right side and at once flung up his hands. They encountered the garments of a man, and though the latter seemed to make a desperate attempt to keep him at the bottom, he succeeded in turning him partially and then it was anybody's fight.

Man to man, with muscle against muscle, they rolled over on the ground like battling panthers.

Dave had no idea who he was fighting, but the fact that the man had attacked was sufficient proof that he was an enemy; and he soon proved himself a most disagreeable one.

The mountaineer was overmatched in brute strength, for though his own muscles were like steel, the stranger had arms and shoulders of astonishing development; but what the former lacked in strength he made up in quickness.

Several times the assailant gained an advantage, but each time Canyon Dave glided cat-like from his hold. He noticed, too, that the big man was breathing heavily, and he was wholly at his ease in regard to the final issue.

The contest soon assumed a new phase, and one which might have proved fatal to Dave but for his watchfulness. He saw his adversary draw a knife and knew that the crisis was at hand.

Again the mountaineer relied on his quickness. He drew a revolver with a jerk and might have ended all with one shot but dared not risk the report. Instead, he struck out with the weapon straight and heavily, and as it encountered the head of the stranger he fell back with a groan.

Canyon Dave sat up and paused to recover his breath. It had been a hard battle and his breath did not come and go as easily as usual.

When he had recovered a little, he looked at his late adversary, who remained insensible. He was the same person who had stood on the rock; a strong, broad-shouldered fellow with a bushy beard, evidently a man of wild life and ignorance, even as his conduct had proved him one of lawless habits.

CHAPTER XIV.

A MYSTERY FOR THE MOUNTAINEER.

CANYON DAVE naturally connected his assailant with the late besiegers of the cabin, for his face was a new one to Silver Spur. The population of that town was not sufficiently dense for neighbors to be strangers, after the fashion of great cities, and, as short a time as he had been at the camp, he knew every inhabitant by sight.

"Undoubtedly one of the gang that attacked Brad's house. Doubtless one of Captain Nevada's men," decided the mountaineer. "Shall I leave him here, or try to learn more? I would like his biography."

Pockets sometimes reveal something, and Dave did not scruple to search his man. He found a goodly sum of coined money, a few worthless articles, and in one pocket a folded paper.

The latter he unfolded. He could dimly see writing upon it, and he struck a match to learn more. A little nursing of the flame enabled him to read as follows:

"ELDORADO EPH:—

"What I have told you afore is straight. Ther gal is at Silver Spur sure, an' t'other party went thar to-day. I reckon thar is fun afoot, an' it may be thar will be money in it. You had better drop around, an' ef I see a chance I'll chip in an' help you work ther claim."

BIG SIERRA."

Dave's light died out, but he remained for some moments staring straight ahead. What meant this letter? Who were Eldorado Eph and Big Sierra, and who were "the girl at Silver Spur" and the "other party" who had gone there?

Some of these questions baffled the mountaineer, but others he believed he could answer, and he turned in suppressed fury toward the unconscious man. He, unless Dave reasoned incorrectly, was Eldorado Eph, and he should yet be made to talk.

From Dave's point of view the man held a secret which deeply concerned him, and he meant to force it from his lips.

"If he can talk straight, the Incognito may go to destruction," was his comment.

Luckily he had in his pocket a small piece of cord, and with this he tightly bound his victim's hands behind him.

This done, he dragged him to the depths of the recess, propped him against the rock and brought water in his hat for a head-bath.

Under this treatment the man soon recovered, winked rapidly several times, tried to use his hands, and then stared surlily at Dave, who had lighted a small torch and was calmly regarding him.

"Well?" said the mountaineer.

"Wal," growled the prisoner.

"Your experiment has got you into a bad scrape, hasn't it?"

"Et looks infernally like it," was the frank admission.

"Why did you attack me?"

This time there was hesitation, but the answer came at last.

"I reckon I was spontaneously insane."

"Ah! Who are you?"

"Name is Eldorado Eph."

"Do you belong at Silver Spur?"

"No; never see'd ther place until ter-night."

"Why did you come?"

"Ter dig gold, like all ther rest."

"Permit me to say, you are a liar, Eldorado Eph. You came because Big Sierra told you there was a chance to make money off of the girl."

The prisoner stared at Dave in blank amazement.

"How did you know that?" he asked.

"Never mind; let it suffice that I do know it; and now I want a clean breast of the matter. Tell me all you know about it."

A stubborn look settled over Eph's face.

"I'll be durned ef I do," he growled.

"You forget that you are in my power. That's right; try your bonds. You will find them firm. Now, my man, let us understand each other. You are just the person I desired to meet, and I'll make it to your advantage to speak straight to me. All I ask at present is to know what you and Big Sierra know about the girl, with some wayside information which is easily given. For this information, I will pay you well."

"What do you know about it?—what do you car' about it?" demanded Eph, in real or assumed surprise.

"Never mind that. Can we trade?"

"No, I'll be durned ef we kin."

"You will not tell?"

"No."

"Is money no object?"

"So much so that you an' me can't trade."

"I will use another argument. You are my prisoner and wholly at my mercy. You had secrets which are dangerous to certain parties, and unless you can be persuaded to share them with me, you are safer dead than living."

Canyon Dave spoke with utter calmness, and drawing his knife, felt of the edge as coolly as though he was about to butcher a mountain sheep.

"I reckon I get your meaning, but et don't move me. Strike, ef you want ter. What's life, anyhow? Only a ghost. It goes an' comes mysteriously, an' our 'arthly existance is only a s'arch fur ther pertic'ler spot o' ground wher we will finally be laid. Them that is sharp-sighted find it 'arly, an' I pity ther stupidity o' them that take eighty year on ther job."

The fellow's philosophy was plainly thrust to the front for effect and came from his head rather than from his heart. He looked at Canyon Dave with a mixture of defiance and doggedness, but his gaze wavered at times.

Dave advanced and laid his knife across the bronzed neck.

"Don't be a fool?" he sternly said. "Obey me and all will be well; refuse, and you shall suffer what you deserve. You attacked me, and your life is forfeited. Will you speak?"

"See yer!" mumbled Eph, "I don't know nothin'."

"It is false. You came to Silver Spur to make money out of your knowledge of that girl. Tell me what you know, or I will put you where your secret will be forever lost."

A hollow gurgle came from the man's throat. The pressure on it from the knife interfered with his breathing, and a terrible fear assailed him, but he still clung to his secret.

Dave changed the position of his knife, and presented the point to Eph's throat. He pricked the skin, and the fellow howled in terror.

"Will you speak?" the captor demanded.

Whether there was an answer Canyon Dave never knew. Just then something heavy and hard seemed to fall on his head, and a brief panorama of colors floated before his eyes, and he became unconscious. When he recovered he was in utter darkness and profound silence. Naturally, he was at first confused, but the pain in his head recalled his wandering senses; he remembered all that had occurred up to the time when he was stricken senseless, and knew that that misfortune was due to a blow from some person who had secretly approached him.

What had happened since?

He partially arose, and his hand encountered his rifle. His revolvers were in his belt, which was most surprising.

He struck a match, saw his half-consumed torch lying near him in a way which showed it had been ground under somebody's heel, again lighted it and saw his knife on the ground; but Eldorado Eph had gone.

After a little delay the mountaineer went to the fountain and bathed his aching head, after which he nearly descended to Brad Hackett's cabin, saw that all was well, and sat down on a rock to reflect.

He had come to Silver Spur in search of a lost girl, who had disappeared some time before in the city of New Orleans. He had searched for her long and earnestly and finally given up; but, while he was in the grizzly mountains, a note

from "Incognito" had caused him to hasten to Silver Spur, where he met the man of mystery, as we have seen.

Then came Eldorado Eph. He, too, was in search of a girl, and Silver Spur was said to be her abiding-place. There were several young ladies about the town, but Dave had no doubt but what they were on the same trail. He had tried to wrest the secret from Eph, but just as a fellow had begun to yield he was thwarted.

Who had dealt the mischievous blow?

Canyon Dave would have given much for an answer to that question. Whoever it was had not been a robber—they had left his weapons and his money—and it seemed as though they had not been more friendly to Eph than to him.

Eph had once viciously attacked him; he had attempted to stab him; and it stood to reason that, once at liberty, he would have finished his work had he not been prevented.

Who, then, had been hostile enough to baffle Dave's pursuit of knowledge, friendly enough to save him from Eph afterward, but at the same time so indifferent to his safety as to leave him where he was liable to be killed by human or animal foes?

It was a question too profound for the mountaineer's solving, and, suddenly arising, he entered Brad's cabin. All was quiet there, and Dave saw fit to report the same state of affairs outside.

The night passed without further adventure; and at dawn Canyon Dave returned to Sprague, who was worrying himself into a fever; but in his explanation his friend told only that part relating to the Hacketts.

CHAPTER XV.

THE JUDGE HAS VISITORS.

LAWRENCE PARMENTER, mine-owner of Silver Spur, and commonly called "the judge," because he at one time held that official position, was alone in his office and engaged in writing.

He was a man upon whom fortune had always smiled, and with a handsome fortune at his back he might long before have retired from business, but he was a man who, while wholly free from miserly qualities, keenly enjoyed battling a world he had always beaten.

To make money was his trade; to spend it, rationally, his pleasure.

We introduce him the afternoon following the events last related.

He was still busy with his writing when the door opened, but the indolent air with which he turned around suddenly vanished. A lady had entered—at least, a woman whose garments, manner and beauty seemed to entitle her to that term in its worldly sense—and Judge Parmenter, at fifty-five, was not indifferent to beauty or without natural politeness.

He arose, placed a chair for her, made a few appropriate remarks, spoke of his rude office, of the village, and of the weather; and then, by a clever pause, gave his visitor a chance to state her business.

"My name is Ripley," she said, with a smile. "Miss Persis Ripley, of San Francisco. I am a stranger in Silver Spur, but I am learning rapidly, for I came here on business. Perhaps you do not believe in ladies engaging in business, but I have done so in the past and intend to continue as before."

"It is well that we have some business ladies to fill the places of the men who lack brains and ambition," the judge said encouragingly.

With the matter thus favorably opened, Miss Ripley found no difficulty in stating her position. She wished to purchase a mine, or a portion of one, in Silver Spur, and for that reason she wished for a good many points and, perhaps, a little advice.

Could Judge Parmenter aid her?

He undoubtedly could, but it was hardly in his line of business. He was a mine-owner, but he neither wished to buy nor sell. As a practical man, he could advise Miss Ripley, and this he did to the best of his ability.

Miss Ripley was very grateful. She smiled on him in her most fascinating way, and gained encouragement from his polite manner; she thanked him warmly and believed he was duly affected.

In one respect, at least, she was observing, and she took her departure just as the judge was feeling the first symptoms of weariness.

He bowed her politely out, lighted a cigar, and with his feet on the top of his desk, leaned back in his chair to give himself up to the luxury of his cigar and to think.

"Thank Heaven! she's gone!" was the way his mind ran. "What the dickens did she come here and worry me in this fashion for? Do I suspend a sign which says that I keep an intelligence office or a school of elocution? I think not. Then why did she nail me for a two hours' interview? If she is going to become a bonanza queen, why don't she have a business agent? I can talk business with a man, but not with a woman. If there is anything which makes my flesh creep, it is a woman with business inclinations!"

Alas for the well-laid plans of Miss Persis Ripley—she had failed to make a favorable impression.

For about five minutes, Judge Parmenter was

in a grizzly bear mood, but his cigar calmed his troubled spirits and he became contented and happy.

He wrote a letter, whistled a fragment of the Star Spangled Banner and—

The door again opened.

This time it was a man who entered, a well-dressed, distinguished-looking, sharp-eyed man, in whom Parmenter at once recognized the evenly-balanced man of the world who is at home in all situations.

"Judge Parmenter, I believe?" said the gentleman.

"Yes, sir," was the polite reply.

"I am Thomas Harper, of San Francisco. I have called to see you on a matter of business; but, first, let us smoke."

This preliminary having been attended to, the gentleman from San Francisco plunged at once into business.

"My errand, judge, is a most peculiar one. It concerns that one of your daughters who is not your daughter."

Mr. Harper was not sure that it was wise to begin so abruptly, but he was satisfied that Parmenter would deny everything, and he wanted to try the effect of a surprise.

He plainly saw the effect.

As the words fell upon the judge's ears the color retreated from his face with startling rapidity; his eyes assumed a wild expression, and his under-jaw dropped.

He sat before Harper, pale, weak and frightened. If he had been charged with murder, and proof given in a flood, he could not have looked more startled and ashen.

Harper calmly waited for him to recover, but not an expression escaped his keen eyes.

Finally Parmenter's color returned somewhat, he helped himself to a draught of water with a hand which shook perceptibly, and then his visitor thought it time to say, in an oily voice:

"I really beg your pardon, my dear judge; it was thoughtless for me to speak so abruptly. I should have remembered the fact that you have for long years regarded my niece as your daughter; but my manners are too brusque, at the best."

"I should say you are afflicted that way, and there is a chance to draw other inferences; but, first of all, I would like to have you make yourself plain."

Parmenter spoke quite composedly, and, though his face was still paler than usual, Harper saw a light in his eyes which warned him of a struggle to come.

He had, however, satisfied himself on one point—one of the three girls known as Parmenter's daughters was Miriam Browning.

It remained for the judge to open his lips and say which of the three was she.

"Certainly, judge," Harper replied, careful now to be very polite and easy. "You see, I have just discovered that my niece, so long lost to her friends, was left on your doorstep sixteen years ago the 20th of last September, and I have hastened here to see her and thank you for long kindness and care. May all blessings be yours, sir."

Harper allowed his voice to tremble a little toward the close of his remarks, but Parmenter's face grew stern instead of softening.

"I do not understand what you mean, sir. I know nothing of your niece, no one has been left on my doorstep, and I have not cared for any one except myself and family."

Harper assumed a look of surprise.

"Do you mean to say that all of the girls you call your daughters are really so?"

"Certainly, sir," replied the judge, haughtily.

"Ah! I see—by adoption. Very good joke, judge!"

The visitor laughed unmusically.

"See here, sir," exclaimed Parmenter, "what do you mean by such extraordinary language? I have three daughters, Helen, Edna and Millicent. Do you mean to say that one of them is but an adopted child?"

"Why, certainly, sir—"

"Which one?" the judge interrupted.

Harper took the one chance in three and hazarded a guess.

"Millicent!"

"Ha! ha!" laughed Parmenter. "And why do you think she is not my daughter?"

"I ask you fairly, sir, is she?"

"She is, sir," was the haughty answer.

Harper swallowed feverishly. So far all had gone as he expected, and though he had ventured on the name of Millicent, he was without means of judging whether he had guessed correctly.

Clearly, he must take another course.

Consequently, after a proper preamble, he gave such an account of the abduction of Miriam Browning as he saw fit, clinging close to the truth when there was no danger of soiling his own garments, and then adding a well-colored account of his final efforts to find her.

Circumstantial evidence sustained him pretty well all the way through, and when he found a weak place he bolstered it up ingeniously, so that the whole looked like an unassailable structure.

Judge Parmenter, however, perfectly cool at last, laughed at the story.

"Your agents have humbugged you, Mr. Harper; that's all there is to this story. As for the part which relates to me and my daughters, it is wholly without foundation. Millicent, Helen and Edna are each and all my daughters; they are sisters, and, what is more, were all born on the same day. Is that plain, sir?"

The assertion was plain enough, but, with what he had previously been told, strengthened by the recent confusion of Parmenter, Harper would then have almost risked his life on the stake that one of the three was not a Parmenter.

"I am amazed," he said.

"And I am amazed that you should believe such a ridiculous story."

"I can not help believing it."

"Even after I have denied it?"

"Judge Parmenter, understand me. I can see what your feelings must be. The girl has been in your charge for sixteen years—wait, sir, wait. Let me finish. She has been like a daughter to you, and it is natural that you should hesitate to give her up. But, sir, remember that if she secures her rights, a fortune of a hundred thousand dollars awaits her in San Francisco. She is its sole possessor."

CHAPTER XVI.

HARPER AS A HUNTER.

PARMENTER listened patiently until his visitor was through, but the argument did not affect him, and his manner was calm and a trifle sarcastic when he next spoke. Harper had confessed that he did not know which one of the three girls was the missing Miriam, and it was pretty evident that the judge had the game in his own hands.

"I suppose," he said, "that when men sell their daughters, money will tip the scale a good deal quicker than any other article; but I am not in that business. I have three daughters, and I shall keep them, while any interference with their pleasure will be punished."

"My dear sir," said Harper, "do you take me for a brigand? I shall never raise a hand against you or the ladies—never, sir, never!"

"I hope you will not."

"On the contrary, I shall depend on your conscience, Judge Parmenter."

The judge did not at once reply. He sat stroking his beard and sharply regarding his visitor. He had gained a sudden idea, and he determined to try it. He would show this impertinent stranger that claws were a natural gift of mankind.

"In what way," he calmly asked, "are you to be a gainer by the recovery of Miriam Browning?"

"Not at all," Harper declared; but he betrayed some confusion in spite of his usual command over his features.

"You are not related to Miriam Browning," the judge mercilessly continued. "Your sister was the child's step-mother. She is, or was, nothing to you. My experience leads me to believe that if the girl was to be found, Mr. Browning would have done that part himself. A father's eyes and zeal are keener than those of a stranger can be."

"Strange things frequently occur," said Harper, with assumed carelessness.

"Yes, and there is an old saying that those who hide can find."

It was Harper's turn to look startled, and the eyes of the judge, cold and penetrating now, as when he was in official life, seemed to look him through.

"What do you mean?" Harper blustered.

"Does the shoe fit you?"

"This is folly," said Harper, suddenly forcing himself into calmness. "I did not come here as an enemy, but as a friend. However, I am going to leave you now, for I want you to reflect on the subject. I will see you again."

He abruptly arose.

"Don't trouble yourself to call," said Parmenter, with sarcasm; "but if you do come, please bring a copy of the will. I wish to see to what extent you are to be a gainer if you find your missing heiress."

Harper turned with his hand on the door.

"Your suspicions are cruelly unjust," he said, "but for the sake of my niece I forgive them. Good-day!" he said, and was gone.

Parmenter watched until he saw him enter the Alexis Hotel and then returned to his seat.

"Jove! this is a pretty fix!" he then muttered, in utter amazement. "Who would have thought of this after all these years! It is like the coming of some one from the grave, and I was knocked all to pieces at first. Thank Heaven, however, I hold the winning cards. This Harper is a rascal; I can see it in his eyes and face; and if he gets troublesome I think I can prevent it. At any rate no human being except myself knows the secret he seeks; my dear child will never be torn from my love and care. I defy any man to select one of the three and say, 'This is Miriam Browning!'"

Meanwhile Harper was going to his room in a hot fury. He had been baffled, defeated, read like an open book and openly accused. There

was murder in his thoughts as he remembered Parmenter.

He locked himself in his room and swore and tried to lay plans for the future, but he saw that he had run his case into a precarious spot. At the first he had felt so sure of finding the heiress at Coyote Cliff that he had taken Cleon along in a burst of sentimentality; but now the black was decidedly in his way.

Oh! if he had only left him at home, and, instead of running about in search of the real heiress, had palmed off a counterfeit one upon the trustees, how much trouble it would have saved him.

"By Jupiter! I'm not sure but we may have to do it yet. Parmenter evidently means to keep a close mouth. Confound it! if it wasn't for Cleon and the clew I have foolishly given him, I would hunt up a new girl, of brunette type, and let Miriam go. An impostor in the place would obey me; the real heiress wouldn't."

There was truth in what he said, but he had started a busy train of thought. If Cleon was out of the way, his path would be one of roses.

"I believe there is a light in the east after all," he muttered. "I'll let this case move slow and if old Parmenter don't divulge, I'll see to it that Cleon don't baffle my plans. A knife or bullet will effectually dispose of him."

Harper laid his plans with coolness known only to the man past the clinging hands of mercy, and then, to dispel the last shadow on his mind, decided to go out for a ramble.

He picked up his rifle, left the hotel, and was soon among the southern hills.

There was much to be seen that was of interest, and he soon forgot all his plottings and cares in the enjoyment of mountain life.

He was, however, destined to meet with an adventure before the afternoon was ended; and just as he rounded a corner of rock, at a bend in the gulch through which he was passing, the rattling of a quantity of earth and small stones down almost in his path caused him to look upward quickly.

There, at the edge of the cliff—which was forty feet high—he saw a bear standing in a composed way, and looking down directly at him.

In an instant his sportsman's instincts arose. Although a fine revolver shot, he had never hunted wild game to any great extent, and to shoot a bear would be a decided novelty and something of which he might be proud.

Accordingly, he brought up his rifle and took sure aim.

The bear kept his place, looking directly at his would-be slayer, but appearing neither alarmed nor inclined to be aggressive.

Harper pressed the trigger, but at that very moment a sharp blow on the barrel caused the muzzle to drop several inches, and he had the satisfaction of knowing he had wasted lead on the cliff.

He wheeled angrily, and saw a young lady standing before him. In her own hands she held a rifle, and Harper knew it was with this she had destroyed his aim.

The fact that he saw a girl instead of a man confused and silenced him for the time. He had turned with his fighting blood in a fever, expecting to see the latter, but he felt ashamed at being thus caught with a corsair look on his face.

"I—I—beg your pardon!" he stammered.

"Did you know that it was mine?" she demanded, with sudden anger.

"That—a—that what was yours?"

"Why, the bear, of course."

"No; I didn't know that bears were parceled off like mines in a paying locality," he said, recovering his self-possession under her curt language.

"Well," she replied more amiably, "you are a stranger in Silver Spur and somewhat excusable, I suppose. The fact is, however, that bear is tame, and my especial property. That's why I prevented you from shooting him."

"I beg a thousand pardons," he said, speaking with sincerity, for her beauty had not failed to attract his attention. "If I had done him damage I would never have forgiven myself."

"Neither would he—had he lived to argue the matter with you. Here he comes now. I thought he would be down when he saw us quarreling."

Harper turned and saw the bear approaching. He seemed to be in a very vicious mood, and as Harper heard his growl and saw his teeth ominously exposed, he felt a strong desire to evacuate the ground.

There was danger in flight, however, and he contented himself with loosening his revolver.

"Bruno, old fellow, why do you scold?" cried the girl. "Come here to me, sir!"

The bear slowly obeyed, but though he went to the girl his eyes were turned toward Harper, and he still growled and showed his teeth. His mistress boxed his ears, but his manner did not change.

"Rather a dangerous pet, I should say," observed Harper, dividing his glances between the two.

"Not to me. Bruno is as obedient as a dog usually, but he knows you are a stranger. Be-

sides, I give him credit for knowing you intended to shoot him."

"He looks it; and now I have abandoned the war-path, he has taken it up."

"Oh! I will see to him."

Harper shifted his position, and the bear growled again, but his hostility called forth so sharp a rebuke from his mistress that he was forced to lie down, from which position he still watched the man he regarded as his enemy.

Harper, however, was looking at the girl. She was remarkably pretty, and seemed ill-suited to such a wild region, but he had seen Judge Parmenter's girls and was not surprised at anything.

The girl with the bear was no stranger to the reader, being 'Gus Hackett, and we have already seen that Harper was not the only man who could admire her.

She had, however, that day made an acquaintance which might cause her trouble before the man left the village.

CHAPTER XVII.

CAPTAIN NEVADA APPEARS.

It was Harper who broke the silence which followed.

"I suppose you live at Silver Spur, miss," he blandly said.

"Yes, sir, I do."

"I have not seen you in the village."

"Very likely," was the unpromising comment.

"Is your father a miner?"

"He is, sir; but he has nothing to sell. He is not a speculator, and receives few visitors. Judge Parmenter is the mining authority of the place, if you wish for information. Come, Bruno, let us go."

The rebuff was too plain to be misunderstood, but Harper was not to be so easily thwarted. The natural rascality of his nature, which in San Francisco had worked out its plans secretly, was affected by the wildness of the mountains. He felt lawless and full of mischief, and was inclined to swagger and boast like a villain of baser clay.

"Wait!" he said, sharply, as 'Gus turned away.

She paused and looked at him icily.

"Did you speak?" she asked, in the same manner.

Her speech and glance confused him for a moment, in spite of his inclinations to be a bravo, for he had not expected such dignity in a mountain girl.

"Yes, I—I did. Pardon me, but why should you be in a hurry?"

"Why should I delay?" she retorted. "I go because my business calls me elsewhere."

"But—pardon me if I am too bold—I should like to form your acquaintance. So pretty a girl as you—"

"Enough!" said 'Gus, with surprising hauteur, and he could see her eyes sparkle ominously. "I do not care for compliments, and I do not think either of us would be benefited by such an acquaintance."

"I can only answer for myself, but so far as my knowledge goes, it would be a very pleasant affair."

'Gus allowed the butt of her rifle to drop to the ground, and then she squarely confronted him, while Bruno hovered at her side and looked ready for war whenever the gauntlet was thrown down.

A smile gradually crept over the girl's face, but it was not one which foretold satisfaction to Harper.

"If I hear of any one who is about to start a menagerie 'round here, I shall recommend you," she remarked. "When I see an old man playing the part of an ape, I like to see him situated where he will do the most good. You are old enough to be my father, but you are still inclined to act the gallant. I have seen such men before, when in San Francisco, but I do not admire them. I must decline your acquaintance."

Harper listened to this merciless address with visible confusion, for he was not an adept in the part he had tried to play, but he was also filled with rage. The idea of Thomas Harper being repulsed and ridiculed by a mountain girl!

"By Jupiter!" he exclaimed, as she finished, "your tongue runs too fast, girl. Be careful what you say, or I may do something rash."

"Don't hesitate on my account. If you feel belligerent, open the ball at once."

She carelessly raised her rifle, and then, as though he understood her words, Bruno growled and showed his teeth menacingly.

Harper was at a loss for words, for he had no desire to break in on the pair, but the awkward pause was broken by a mocking laugh which came from neither of them.

They turned and saw before them a gayly-dressed, handsome young man—in brief, Captain Nevada.

He advanced a few paces, unheeding Bruno's growls, and then, leaning on his rifle, laughed again, and in a manner as buoyant as though the whole world was a garden of roses.

"Pardon me for appearing at this sociable," he good-naturedly said, "but it struck me some

one was needed to pour oil on the troubled waters."

"Don't trouble yourself, my young bantam," said Harper, sourly, looking with disdain at the velvet suit and red sash.

"So I am a bantam? Very good for a beginning. If you have any more remarks, please present them at this term of the court."

"I will inform you that your presence is not desired here. You are too much dandy and too little man."

"Have seen those who did not agree with you," said Nevada, calmly. "Don't judge the horse by his color or you will get taken in. Now to maintain the position I have taken, I agree to convince you that I am a manly man, as I may term it, before you sleep again."

The robber paused and looked at 'Gus.

"What have you to say, my dear young lady?" he politely asked.

"Nothing, sir."

The boldness of the girl had vanished. She knew the new-comer, if Harper did not, and she was filled with alarm. She had heard stories of his deeds which branded him with infamy, and she remembered the suspicion that it was he who had attacked the cabin.

Nevada raised one hand, and from the niches of the gulch other men stepped out until a dozen were visible. They were less gaudily dressed than the captain, but had the same wild lawless air.

"Here are the scene-shifters of our company," said the leader. "Now, you man, there, who think me a mere dandy, let me introduce myself. I am Captain Nevada!"

The words were spoken with conscious pride, for he knew every man within fifty miles had heard of him; and the effect on Harper was easily seen.

He started, changed color, and stared as though he had seen a ghost.

Stranger though he was about Silver Spur, he had heard of Captain Nevada, and he did not forget the fight around the stage.

The outlaw laughed as he saw his trepidation.

"A mere dandy, but still—Captain Nevada!"

"I'll take it all back," said Harper, trying to act as though he believed the affair only a joke.

"You cry remarkably quick," sneered Nevada, "but you have only begun your starring tour on this stage. I know you well. I tried to get at your purse once before, when you were en route to this camp, but that beggar on horseback used lead too lively for our good."

The robber paused and looked reflectively at Bruno. He had definite plans in view, but the bear was an impediment. He disliked to kill him, but it was plain he must in some way be disposed of.

"Send your dog away, young lady," he said, addressing 'Gus.

"Bruno, come here!" said she, starting away.

"Hold on!" said Nevada, hastily; "you don't understand. The bear may go, but you are to stay."

"Bruno and I are inseparable, sir," she said, with reviving firmness.

"The best of friends must part. With this preface, let me say that you two are to go to my cave in the mountains. In plain words, you are my prisoners. Now, as I dislike useless talk, I will make believe that both of you have put in an earnest argument and plea against my course, and that I have refused to yield an inch. All this I shall certainly do. You must go with us."

"I shall not submit!" declared Harper.

"I don't care whether you do or not—you will go, just the same. Ha! none of that! Let that revolver alone. Up with your hands or I will put a bullet through you! Up, I say!"

Harper had tried to secretly draw a revolver, but the keen-sighted outlaw had thwarted him, and his own weapon had forced the other to obey.

Then Nevada motioned to one of his men who moved around and covered Harper, while the captain turned to 'Gus.

"Once more," he said, "I tell you to send the bear away."

"I refuse," she replied, firmly, "and if you molest us we shall both resist. Go your way, Captain Nevada, and let us alone."

He looked at her for a moment as though admiring her courage and then slowly raised his revolver and covered Bruno.

She threw up her rifle quickly.

"Beware, sir!" she said, as firmly as before. "If you harm the bear your life shall pay the debt!"

It was a brave declaration, but Nevada had provided for such an emergency. While 'Gus spoke, a fellow in the dress of a Mexican had crept around behind her, and at the distance of thirty feet flung out a lasso.

It fell fairly over her shoulder, and then a quick jerk pinioned her arms to her sides, wrenched the rifle from her grasp and nearly caused her to lose her footing.

Then others sprang forward and seized her, there was some confusion and a rifle-shot; and when the outlaws parted a little, the girl's hands had been bound behind her.

It was not of herself she thought at that moment, however, she had heard the shot and at once looked for the cause and effect.

Ten feet away, Bruno lay motionless. Nevada had shot him with an aim so deadly that he had scarcely stirred.

Gus looked at him with flashing eyes, but if she intended to speak the chance was lost when a gag was inserted in her mouth.

Harper had been similarly served, and the two stood side by side, subject to the same fortune just then, but with an unknown future ahead of them.

The outlaw chief had relapsed into a silent and almost gloomy mood, unusual to him, and he made no more talk except to give a few necessary orders.

And thus they began their march to the lair on the steep side of the Camel's Hump.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TROUBLE FOR CANYON DAVE.

DAVID CANTON and Otis Sprague were slowly returning from their day's work. The former had secured but little sleep the previous night, and, consequently, did not feel in a very energetic mood.

The time was twilight.

The friends were conversing carelessly as they passed along near the timber belt at the foot of the Camel's Hump, but they were a little stirred out of their languor as they heard a crashing in the bushes.

"A bear," suggested Sprague.

"Or Captain Nevada," said Dave, laughing.

Just then a man burst from cover at a rapid run, but seeing them, came forward as though greatly pleased.

Neither of the miners remembered having seen him before, but to us he is no stranger—it was Cleon, the negro.

He ran excitedly toward the two friends.

"Oh! bress de Lord! I's so glad to see you. I's huntin' for somebody, an' I's found you. Dey hab carried dem off, sah! dey hab, for sure!"

"Carried who off?" Dave asked.

"Ole Massa Harper an' de gal, sah. Oh! land ob Goshen! dey will be killed an' burnt at de stake. Dey hab fallen among de Philistines, an'—"

"Hold on, right there, old man," said Dave, catching him by the arm. "What girl are you talking about, and who has carried her off?"

"I s'pect it am de road-agents dat hab got her, but I nebber see'd her afore. She hab got on a red shawl an' big black hat—"

"What?"

Canyon Dave's voice rung out sharply, and his hold on Cleon's arm grew painful.

The negro was thrown completely off the track by this unexpected fierceness, but after some stammering he managed to make it clear that while wandering about the gulches of the Camel's Hump, he had seen a body of men bearing away Thomas Harper and a young lady he did not know.

His description, however, conclusively proved that it had been Gus Hackett.

"Sprague," cried the mountaineer, "there is work for us. Miss Hackett must be rescued."

"I am with you; what's the plan?"

"You and I will take to the trail at once, while the negro shall go to the village and give the warning. He has only to say that 'Gus Hackett is missing, and rescuers will be thick enough.'"

This plan was acted upon, and Dave and Sprague began the ascent of the mountain. The former showed a feverish impatience, but Sprague was calm and grave. He had doubts of their ability to find the captives, for no outsider knew where was the lair of Captain Nevada, and the mountain side was cut by gulches in which were hundreds of places of concealment.

There seemed about one chance in a hundred that they would succeed.

The timber-belt was soon left behind, and the mountain side vigorously attacked. Darkness fell while they climbed, and far below twinkled the lights of the village. The way became rougher, and progress difficult, and at last Canyon Dave paused and dropped down on a boulder.

"Why have you followed me on such a wild chase?" he abruptly asked.

"Because I wouldn't see you go alone. But why do you say it is a wild chase?"

"I am convinced that nothing can be done until to-morrow. What one of us can find a carefully-hidden cave in utter darkness? I should have thought of these things at first, but—well, Otis, you know I was upset by the peril of 'Gus.'"

Sprague tried to talk consolingly, and as Dave recovered somewhat from his exhaustion, his courage came back. It might be folly to search by night, but he would not let an idle moment pass.

They went on, and, as the gulches grew deeper, walked where rocky walls towered far above them, and the mountain side was cut as though by strokes of a giant's sword.

And in this wild place Captain Nevada had his home.

Half way up the mountain side, and in this network of confusing passages, a fire was blazing in a cave, its flickering light falling on three or four forms near at hand.

It was the camp of Captain Nevada, though not that stronghold he occupied as a home. The ascent of the mountain had been so hard upon 'Gus that even his hard heart was touched, and he concluded to give her a chance to rest.

For Harper he had no such mercy, so all the party went on excepting 'Gus, himself, and two men. These four had taken to the cave, there to eat supper from their supplies, and to rest until after midnight.

There was some danger in the delay, but Nevada felt a scornful disregard for the miners.

Having eaten his supper, he lay down before the blaze, and smoked thoughtfully and gravely. Then he moved to the girl's side.

"Miss Hackett," he said, "your heart is bitter against me, and you think me the greatest villain unbung. I am sorry for that, for I love you. That is why I have taken you away, and if that be a crime, I have erred. All of us are human, however, and I trust you will not think badly of me. If you can smile on one whose only fault is in loving you so much, I would be glad."

He spoke in a mood strangely meek for one of his lawless trade, but his audacity amazed 'Gus.

"You do not speak reasonably," she said, with spirit. "Are you not Captain Nevada, whose crimes are the talk of all this neighborhood? And when we refer to personal affairs, it seems to me that an honest suitor would use different methods from what you have to-day practiced."

The outlaw sighed heavily.

"It is the fate of my sex to be misjudged by yours," he gravely said. "Our most gallant devotion wins us no applause. We work for you and you reward us not. Ah! Miss Hackett, you do not know what warm hearts beat under our rough coats."

"I have had a good sample of yours."

"Cruel as ever!"

"Sir, your impudence astonishes me."

"I feared it would," he said, looking very sad.

"Is this treatment manly?" she asked, her voice less steady than usual. "Is it not enough that I should be your captive? Why do you add to my burden?"

His face changed a little.

"I suppose I am an infernal villain," he acknowledged, "but I am a victim of fate. All my evil ways have been driven into me by—the law! But we will speak of this anon. We have just about four hours to stay here, and I, for one, propose to sleep. I advise you to do the same. This cave has two places of exit; the one by which we entered, and one at the rear which opens out on a shelf of rock. At the former, I shall place a guard, but as the latter is bordered by a precipice a hundred feet high, I do not think you will escape. I mention this because I shall leave you unbound, and wish to show you how useless it would be to try to get away."

He turned away and she did not attempt to detain him. He spoke to his men and one went away as a guard, while Nevada and the other lay down and seemed to soon fall asleep.

'Gus, however, had no such intention. She sat where the outlaw had left her, and, despite his last words, allowed her mind to run on a possible escape.

Was such a thing possible? The cave was narrow, scarcely more than twenty feet wide; and the passage by which they had entered was guarded by one of the men.

The further end was invisible in the darkness, and, though Nevada had so confidently said that it ended in a precipice, she resolved to see for herself.

She softly arose, lifted a brand from the fire, and walked toward the rear of the cave.

The outlaws remained motionless.

Very soon her torch began to waver, and she felt fresh air on her face: and then she reached a small opening in the solid rock—a place which was like a door.

She stepped through and found firm footing still, but she was not long in finding that she was on the shelf of which Nevada had spoken. It was a nearly level ledge, forty feet long, but in no place more than half as wide, and tapering to a point at both ends. A few dwarfed trees arose from occasional crevices.

She walked to the edge and held the torch out as far as she could reach, but only darkness and vacancy were before her. She listened, but no sound arose to give her information.

Having found that the cliff above the ledge was too steep to be climbed, she was at a point where the majority of people would have despaired, but she had yet one experiment to try.

She reentered the cave. The outlaws still slept, and with great care she glided past them and secured a lasso which had been cast on the floor. It was the same weapon with which she had been subdued, near the village, but now she hoped to put it to better use.

Returning to the ledge, she tied the end of the lasso to the torch, and then, standing near

the edge of the rock, slowly dropped her fiery pathfinder down the chasm.

Really, she expected nothing of the venture, but as the lasso was of unusual length, she would at least have the satisfaction of knowing that she could not escape by this way.

She allowed the lasso to slip slowly through her hands, and the torch, turning about as it descended, showed a wall of rock on one side and darkness and vacancy on the other until it abruptly ceased to hang as a weight upon the sensitive wrists of the girl.

Had she really "struck bottom?"

CHAPTER XIX.

ON THE LEDGE.

'Gus felt a sudden thrill of joy and then grew calmer. It could not be that the lasso had reached the foot of the cliff—such luck would be too good for belief and would speak ill for Captain Nevada's sagacity.

If it had, however, the way of escape was open, for three or four dwarfed trees grew on the ledge and she did not doubt her ability to descend by means of the lasso.

Prostrating herself on the rocks, she looked eagerly over to see what the light would reveal. The torch was plainly visible, and as 'Gus looked something suddenly appeared within the lighted circle and a human face looked up into her own.

Conflicting emotions then assailed her. She knew not whether she had seen a friend or a foe, and for a moment she hesitated.

Then a voice arose from the chasm.

"'Gus! 'Gus!"

Joy flashed through her heart. She had heard her name; there could be no doubt of it; and she felt sure that rescue was at hand.

"'Gus! 'Gus!"

The cry startled her this time. She feared it would be heard by her enemies inside the cave, and that meant sure destruction.

She waved her hand, forgetting that she must be now invisible to whoever was below, and hurried a little aside to where one of the dwarfed trees before mentioned arose from the thin soil which in places covered the ledge. She tried the tree, found it firm and tied the end of the lasso with sailor-like skill.

Next, she prepared to descend, but at that moment the tree began to sway in a way which at first perplexed her; but as she saw that the lasso was drawn tightly she realized that whoever was below was climbing upward.

This was not to her liking, but she once more looked over the ledge.

Between her and the torch she saw a man ascending hand over hand, catching with his feet at such crevices as were to be found.

While she looked he turned his face upward and she recognized Canyon Dave.

A thrill of pleasure made her heart throb faster. She was not forgotten in her trouble; one person, at least, was working in her behalf.

In the midst of her exaltation a hand was suddenly placed over her mouth and a strong arm drew her back from the verge. She looked up and saw one of the outlaws, a burly ruffian with an evil face. She struggled in his grasp, but he flung her backward with a force which left her stunned and bruised upon the rock.

Then he hastened to the edge of the ledge and looked over. He saw the climbing man below, and with a smile which was almost fiendish, he drew his knife and leaned forward to cut the lasso.

Canyon Dave was within ten feet of the top, but one stroke of the knife would send him to certain death at the foot of the cliff.

It was higher than we have yet shown.

Dave and Sprague, wandering through a canyon, had seen a light far above them—at least a hundred and fifty feet. They were puzzled and uncertain, but, resolving to investigate if possible, they attacked the rough face of the cliff, and, by chance, the mountaineer, accustomed to just such work, made his way far up by ladders of Nature's own manufacture.

He had reached what seemed an impassable point when, to his great surprise, a torch came steadily down the face of the rock, but a keener glance showed him a female form and he was sure it was 'Gus.

When the light reached his feet, he called to her, but no answer came and, of course, she was not visible in the darkness.

He discovered, however, that the lasso had been made fast and at once he began to climb.

It was no easy work, even for his hardened muscles, but he found many rests for his feet and went on steadily, unconscious of the smiling wretch above who would thus send him to eternity.

To all appearances, there was no one to see the deed, no one to prevent it. 'Gus lay motionless on the ledge and the ruffian's heart was without pity.

Still, the lasso did not part. Canyon Dave drew nearer the top, pulled himself upward, caught at the dwarfed tree and then lay tired and panting on the ledge.

But, where was 'Gus? She did not appear, and he called her name softly. There was no answer; dead silence reigned all around him.

Perplexed and uneasy, he reached down and

drew the torch upward. That, at least, would give him light.

As it arrived at the top he caught it in one hand and looked keenly around.

The first object which met his gaze was a man of muscular frame who lay flat on his back, almost at Dave's feet, a red stream flowing over his clothes and his eyes fixed in a glare which seemed intended for the mountaineer's face.

Yet, mischief had gone from his body with his life, and the clay which remained could do no harm.

All this Canyon Dave saw, but it was something more which caused him to start in fresh surprise. In the dead man he recognized the fellow he had fought the previous night near Brad Hackett's cabin, the mysterious "Eldorado Eph."

How had he come on that ledge, stabbed to the heart as he was? Close beside him lay a knife, but it was bloodless; another than that had sped his life.

The mountaineer had not yet moved when 'Gus came forward from the darkness. Her insensibility had been but brief, and she now advanced and clasped the hand of Canyon Dave.

"Oh! Dave, Dave! I am so glad to see you!" she exclaimed.

"The pleasure is mutual, I do assure you, but I do not understand this part of my reception."

He had both her hands in his, but found it hard to take his gaze from the face of Eldorado Eph.

"Ah! he is dead. Did you kill him?"

"Did I? No; I found him there when I came up the cliff."

'Gus looked amazed.

"How in the world did he die, then?"

"Who was he?"

"One of my captors. He was sleeping in the cave yonder a moment ago, but he came out and attacked me while you were climbing up. He hurled me to one side so violently, that I fell senseless, and I came back to life to find you here."

Canyon Dave heard the explanation but did not answer. He was looking down at the death-marked face of Eldorado Eph. The man had held a secret which might have done him much good, but he had died with it untold.

'Gus crept closer to her protector. The darkness, the yawning gulf, her living enemies and this dead man, all combined, terrified her in spite of her brave nature.

"Dave! Dave!" she whispered. "Let us go from here. I can bear it no longer."

The mountaineer aroused. He was once more the bold man of adventure, and questioned her until he learned the exact situation of affairs.

"Only two men against us," he slowly said. "Very good. In that case, our way lies through the cave. I had rather fight two men than to risk my life on that cliff. It has many shelves of rock, and by them I came up, but one misstep would send a man to destruction."

"One of those men is Captain Nevada," she said.

"So much the better. This region will never be at peace until that fellow is disposed of, and I may as well take the duty. I know he bears a bad reputation as a fighter, but seriously, I am not afraid of him."

"Then let us go while he sleeps."

Dave looked wistfully at the clay before them. He would have given all his worldly wealth to have known how Eldorado Eph died and the secret he held, but the matter was shrouded in mystery.

They went cautiously to the entrance to the cave, and then 'Gus caught Dave's arm.

"Captain Nevada is not where I left him; he has left the light of the fire and hid in a place of ambush."

"If that's his game, we must go slow. Perhaps I can draw his fire."

They had retreated from range, but he now exposed the top of his cap. Useless attempt! the Indian-fighter's trick was in this case of no avail.

For some time the young couple remained listening, but the impression grew upon the mountaineer that no one was in the cave. That the road-agents had actually retired and abandoned their prisoner seemed improbable, but mystery began with the death of Eldorado Eph, and was liable to continue.

At last, Dave resolved to act in the case, and invaded the cave, his revolvers ready for use. 'Gus was full of fear, but no shot came from the shadows, and he walked on to the other entrance.

There lay another man, the owner of the lasso, a fellow called Leon. At first Dave thought that he, too, was dead, but investigation showed that he was only unconscious; while a suspicious odor led the mountaineer to believe he had been drugged.

He called to 'Gus, and they safely left the vicinity. Captain Nevada had disappeared in a most mysterious way. There was chance to suspect that it was he who had disposed of his followers, but the idea was so wild that neither of our friends entertained it.

The reasonable supposition was that some stranger had killed Eph, drugged Leon, and

made way with Nevada, but even that theory left one great question unsolved—who had done all this?

Canyon Dave felt himself surrounded by mystery. Eldorado Eph had come and gone in a strange fashion, but he had died with his secret untold, and remained only as a proof of some power working behind the scenes.

CHAPTER XX.

A DARK PLOT.

CANYON DAVE and 'Gus were not long in finding Sprague, and then the journey down the mountain was begun. All were in good spirits, for the fact that 'Gus had been found and rescued before she was immured in the depths of the outlaws' retreat was indeed most fortunate.

A little later they encountered the searching party aroused by Cleon. Brad Hackett led the company and their greeting was hearty; after which all turned back toward Silver Spur. Cleon put in a word for Harper, but the man was a stranger at the village and the miners had no intention of breaking their necks over precipices by risking a search by night.

The party went directly to the village, and Brad was prevailed upon to place 'Gus in a securer place than his cabin for the time. It was evident that Nevada had resolved to possess her, and in some way he must be foiled.

Consequently, 'Gus, Brad, Canyon Dave and Sprague followed Judge Parmenter to his house.

The latter heard of the captivity of Harper with a joy he but ill concealed. He was not a vindictive man, but it would afford him great pleasure if the heiress-hunter never reappeared at Silver Spur.

Leaving this friendly little company for awhile, let us go back to a scene which occurred outside the village just after dark.

Half an hour before, two men had left the Alexis Hotel and wandered away like people who have no definite object in view. They were Ball and Carter, the gamblers before mentioned, but for this evening they had given up their usual work to followed another trail.

Once outside the village their indolent air vanished and they went with more rapid steps along the gulches until half a mile from the hotel.

"I reckon this is the place," said Ball, at length.

"Yes, so it seems. There is the rock, just as she described it. Let us sit down and wait."

"What do you suppose is wanted of us?"

"Oh! some villainy; it don't make any difference what."

"It makes a good deal of difference to me," said Ball, firmly. "I'm in for anything where there is money, if the danger don't overtop it, but I'm not going to put my precious neck in a noose."

"Rest easy; it ain't likely the woman has anything of that kind in view. The plots of women are like thunder. They make a good deal of noise, and the women think they are killing lots of game, but, really, they amount to nothing."

"I'm not so sure of that. Women overrate their plots, it's true, but they weave ten webs where a man weaves one, and their schemes are as spiteful as a hornet's sting."

The amateur philosophers continued their discussion until the approach of a third person interrupted them.

"It is she," said Ball, straightening his collar.

The new-comer advanced and proved to be Persis Ripley. She gave each one of them a hand and smiled with all possible grace.

"You are prompt," she said, in her most mellow voice, "and I am very glad it is so. I should be dreadfully afraid alone here in the dark."

"We will protect you," said Ball, valiantly.

"Even from Captain Nevada?"

Ball answered affirmatively, though less promptly than before. He wondered if any one had dared to say that they had not behaved like heroes when Nevada attacked the stage.

"Well, I feel perfectly safe, I assure you, and now I will come to business. I told you I wanted to speak with you on a matter of business and asked you to meet me here. Do you know more about the matter?"

"Not a thing," said Ball.

"We are willing to learn, Miss Ripley," added Carter.

"Very well. Now, I want two agents in an important work; men who will not be afraid to act boldly and run a little risk if there is money visible at the end of the race."

"I see," said Ball, cautiously.

"You hesitate. Why? Do you fear to trust me?"

Miss Ripley laid her hand on the gambler's arm, and even in the darkness he saw a charming smile on her face.

"The whole matter is right here," he said, frankly. "Gentlemen of our trade have to be very careful to obey the law, and if we do break any of its forms, we must be sure we are acting safely. You are a stranger to us, but your guarantee that all is right will be sufficient."

"My dear sir, I will swear to it. I never go back on a pard. There is danger in my plan, but no more for you than for me."

"Let me hear it," interrupted Carter.

"I have an enemy in Silver Spur."

"Is it the dagger or quick poison?"

Persis looked keenly at the speaker.

"Dare you use them?" she asked.

"For money, I would even serve as a Sunday school superintendent," Carter declared.

"Well, I do not care to have blood shed, though, if there should be, I will not complain. In fact, that will be more to my liking, but I will not urge you to proceed to this extremity."

"Who is the man?"

"The person is a woman!"

"Ah!"

There was a world of significance in the one word. When one woman hates another sufficiently to wish her dead, there is usually a man between them. Carter tried to think who stood in Persis Ripley's light, but he was not sufficiently acquainted at Silver Spur to solve the riddle.

"In brief," said Persis, "I wish this woman to disappear completely, perhaps forever; and under such circumstances that people will say she was murdered."

"I don't like the last idea," said Ball. "When murder is done, the law wants another victim, and suspicion sometimes falls on the right party."

"Wait," said the woman; "my plan is more wide and comprehensive than you think. Suspicion in this case will not point at the guilty parties, but everything will go to show that another person—an innocent man—performed the deed."

"Oh! I think you have two enemies in Silver Spur," observed Ball.

"No; only one. The person I last mentioned will be menaced because I want him in my power. The idea is to take away the woman, and either confine her in a cave or—put her forever out of the way, while the traces left behind will show that she was killed by the man, and that he had a motive. These proofs I shall myself manipulate, and they will put the man in my power."

"And what is our part?"

"To make way with the girl and attend to some trifling details. That is all. You may do as you see fit with the girl, only don't let her return."

"In plain words, you prefer that we should kill her," said Carter, bluntly.

"You can act your own pleasure," Persis blandly said.

"Who are these persons?"

"You have not yet said that you will perform the work."

"What is the pay?"

"One thousand dollars in ready money."

"In that case, you can count us in. Give us the details and the names."

It was half an hour later when Miss Ripley left the men and started on her return to Silver Spur. She had not gone far when Miguel Perez came out of a niche in the rocks, joined her and walked on at her side.

"Well, what luck?" he asked.

"Can you ask? Do I ever fail to succeed? Our luck is not going to desert us yet. Ball and Carter were like clay in my hands. They will do the work, and we will at the same time be in so good company that no one will suspect us. In a week I will have Judge Parmenter at my feet, and, through him, the fair Edna shall fall into your hands."

"I regret the necessity which takes the other girl out of the world. Stay! why could we not make Sprague the victim?"

"Bah! you are insane. It would not answer at all. No; let well enough alone and trust to my plan. Believe me, it will place us all in clover."

"We will go on, then," said Miguel; "but I have an uneasy feeling about the matter. Some of these days, my friend, we will run our heads into a noose."

"Bah! what do you fear? I tell you the world is like a drum. Beat it softly and slowly and it will last forever. Ah, Miguel, with all your cunning, you lack a woman's skill at planning."

She struck him lightly on the arm, and as he demurred no further, it is to be presumed that her arguments were successful.

On reaching the Alexis they separated, and Miguel went to the bar-room. Its singular loneliness at once struck him. Two men sat sleeping in their chairs, and the bar-keeper was idly smoking at one side. All the gay devotees of Bacchus usually seen there were invisible.

Perez indulged in a drink of whisky and asked for an explanation, and then he heard for the first time of 'Gus Hackett's abduction, the searchers not having then returned.

"Everybody has gone out arter ther varmint," said the bar-keeper, "an' that's why trade is so poor. Them two galoots over thar was too drunk ter go, and they have sence filled up until they are clean gone. Luckily for ther financial standin' o' ther house, they have been too drunk to count their change."

The man seemed in a rather jovial mood, but his words fell on unheeding ears. Perez was thinking of 'Gus Hackett; for very good reasons her disappearance was of interest to him.

CHAPTER XXI.

SYMPTOMS OF A RIOT.

WHEN the rescue-party returned there was a general rush for the Alexis saloon, and the trade at the bar kept the presiding genius flying about constantly for an hour.

The miners were very thirsty after their tramp, and from what they said, Joe Ruger, the bar-tender, decided that Captain Nevada's army must be pretty nearly annihilated.

He asked some questions, and learned that twelve outlaws had been killed, and in the face of this cheering announcement, coupled with speeches from some of the bold warriors, he became so overjoyed that he "treated the house."

When he learned that, of all the party, only Canyon Dave had seen a road-agent, he was bitterly disappointed. Nevada still lived, but his whisky had gone, forever gone.

It was well toward morning when the miners sought their homes, but otherwise all was peaceful at the village.

Joe Ruger was just stirring himself after a short sleep when a pounding at the door hastened his movements. He opened, and then in walked Thomas Harper, his face pale in places and blood-streaked in others.

Joe stared, but Harper considered it a time for prompt action.

"Set out your whisky bottle!" he commanded.

It was a direction Joe did not feel like refusing to obey. He placed the article as directed, and Harper took a most powerful drink.

"Bless the man that invented this villainous compound," he muttered. "It is sure death in the long run, but for the time being it can set a man's blood in motion. Now, give me soap and water."

He washed away the blood and the bar-tender applied a little ointment to the bruise on his scalp which had produced it, and then Harper felt like a man raised from the grave.

The story of his escape from the road-agents stamped him as a man of nerve. He was new to the mountains, but he had the natural gifts of a brave man, and this had helped him through.

All the way up the mountain he had been working at his bonds, and, at last, they gave way. Then he snatched a revolver from the belt of the nearest man, knocked its owner down, shot another man, and made a dash for liberty.

The crowd closed around him. He fired right and left and struck out manfully. He had one advantage—born of the darkness—being alone, he could hit every head that appeared, while the outlaws were obliged to use care or they would kill one another.

Once, one of them struck with painful accuracy; he received the blow on his head and was nearly stunned; but by desperate exertion he succeeded in breaking through them, and, in the darkness, made good his escape.

His timely return removed the necessity of a search for him, but the camp was so excited over the double abduction that a meeting was called and measures considered for a grand expedition against Captain Nevada.

The busy miners could afford to let the robber have a little rope, but when he tried to gather in all that hung around Silver Spur, it was time to stop his unpleasant freedom.

Brad Hackett was so affected by his daughter's adventure that he consented to have her remain at Parmenter's as Edna's guest; a change in the situation which materially affected several parties, and none more than Persis Ripley and the gamblers.

There was a good deal of plotting and planning in Silver Spur just at that time, but circumstances compelled each person who had a work to accomplish to go slow, and a week passed without an event of great importance.

Harper and Cleon saw the three reputed daughters of Parmenter, but could not decide which one was Miriam Browning. The resemblance between them lay chiefly in their black hair and eyes, but one looked as much like the Browning family as another. Harper had made another strong but useless appeal to the judge, and there he had to let the matter rest.

Persis Ripley and Perez were not sleeping, and the hour for them to strike was near at hand.

Canyon Dave labored steadily and tried to be patient; but he saw Incognito no more and feared the worst. His friendship continued with 'Gus, and Sprague believed he was making headway with Edna Parmenter.

Since the last night of adventure, Captain Nevada's band had kept wholly out of sight, and there were some who believed he had been killed, or had fled from the vicinity.

One evening, Dave and Sprague sauntered into the Alexis saloon. The scene was as usual. Men were drinking, smoking, gambling and talking in loud voices, and mirth of the kind they courted ruled the hour.

At one table, the two friends saw Ball, Saw-

tooth Sam and two unknown men playing poker. Within the last two weeks there had been several new arrivals at the village and strangers were no longer a novelty.

Of the quartette just mentioned, all were very quiet except Sawtooth Sam. He possessed a nature entirely hostile to quietness, and it was his boasting that had drawn the miners' attention.

Since his arrival in town, Sam had worked in Barclay Brothers' mine by day and played cards at night until he was pretty well situated financially, and there were few in Silver Spur who did not know him well.

Luck was on this occasion going against Sam and his partner, though both played with skill and courage. Ball, having devoted so many years to the occupation, always did his work in a cool, steady and shrewd fashion; and Sam, though very uneven and at times careless, atoned for all by an occasional spurt of brilliancy which was admirable, if the word can be applied to gambling.

Canyon Dave, however, being a shrewd observer, was not long in suspecting that at least two of the players were deliberately cheating. He saw movements which seemed suspicious to him, but they were so careful that he was not sure.

He arose and went near them; but, just as he did so, something was suddenly thrust into his left hand which, half-closed, had been behind him while passing through the crowd.

He raised his hand and found a folded note inside. He looked for whoever had handed it, but saw him not. Some one, wishing to remain unknown, had thrust the paper into his hand and then assumed an innocent look.

It might be either one of four men near him, but all were plain miners, all were closely watching the game, and not one had a conscious look.

The mountaineer remembered how another note had come to him in that very saloon, and, hoping he was again to hear from Incognito, he went aside and unfolded his letter.

Delicate and shapely writing was that which met his gaze, but the words were few and unsatisfactory:

"CANYON DAVE:—A friend would like to tell you of a danger which hovers over you, and will cause your death unless well guarded against. At the southeast corner of the hotel you will find a boy who will guide you to one who will risk all for you. Do not fail!"

Truth."

The mountaineer was considerably surprised, for the writing was clearly that of a lady, while her solicitude for his safety, and the veil of mystery she saw fit to throw around herself seemed wholly unnecessary.

Again, the expression, "one who will risk all for you," sounded a trifle too warm for an ordinary correspondent, and he mentally decided that there was something behind it which might be worth knowing.

"I'll see the matter through," he at once decided. "I've struck a peculiar line of adventure since I dropped on Silver Spur, but I reckon I can keep my head above the current. I'll follow this matter through; but first I'll speak to Otis Sprague. Maybe, this is all a plot to close up my earthly account, in which case I want some one to overhaul my trunk."

He smiled at the idea and re-entered the saloon, but as he went in he was struck by the change that had taken place in the scene.

When he left, the patrons of the Alexis had been in groups here and there, and all was serene from floor to ceiling. When he re-entered a deeper hush had fallen, but it looked like the hush before a storm.

Every man was on his feet, and all eyes were fixed on a common point, where Sawtooth Sam stood towering above all others, one foot in his chair and the other on the table.

He looked excited and angry, and as Dave entered he suddenly brought one hand down upon the other with a resounding crack.

"I've said it once, an' I say it ag'in gents; them durned galoots was a-cheatin'!" he said after the fashion of a young hurricane.

Plainly, his remarks referred to the two men who had played against Ball and himself, but in spite of the accusation they had thus far kept their seats.

Now one of them slowly arose.

"I reckon there is a blunder somewhere," he said, and there was an evident struggle for calmness. "My name is Barney Moore, and I always play a square game."

"It's a lie!" shouted Sawtooth Sam, who seemed in a great tumult. "You're a liar and a cheat, an' I kin swa'r I think you are some-thin' more."

At the last word he suddenly moved forward on the table, and caught at the full brown beard worn by the gentleman named Moore, and then the beard fell completely away and revealed the features of Captain Nevada!

CHAPTER XXII.

CANYON DAVE PERPLEXED.

SAWTOOTH SAM'S movement had been so sudden that the road-agent had no chance to guard against it, and before any one except the miner comprehended that war was inevitable, the re-

doubtable Captain Nevada stood unmasked before them.

He, however, was not inclined to play the baby; he might not win the game, but he would play it for all it was worth.

One upward movement he made with his fist, and Sam turned heels over head and disappeared in the crowd, and then out came a pair of flashing revolvers.

"Nevertheless, I'm still here," he said, "and the man who stands in my way—"

He paused suddenly, for the affair had taken on another interesting turn. Ball, encouraged by the luck of his partner, had made a spring at the beard of Nevada's mate, and the two were engaged in a regular grizzly bear contest.

Ball had secured a good hold and he held on like a burr; but he had picked out a bad adversary and did not seem to make much progress.

"Let me go, curse you!" hissed his enemy. "Carajo! I'll kill you if you don't!"

Thus far no one had stirred to touch Nevada. There were many present who recognized him, but they had not recovered from their amazement at his boldness in venturing into their midst, and all their attention was on the fighting men.

What might have been expected suddenly came to pass. Ball succeeded in tearing a false beard away from the face of his companion, but the movement was instantly followed by the straight, heavy thrust of a knife, and homicidal blood spurted out over the floor of the Alexis.

That moment was fraught with developments in the plan of fate. The tearing away of the beard revealed the face of Miguel Perez, while his avenging arm had driven home to Ball's heart a ready knife.

Captain Nevada uttered a curse and his revolvers spoke almost simultaneously, and almost total darkness followed the shots. He had extinguished the principal lights of the room by well-directed bullets, and then he made a dash for the crowd.

The scene that ensued can only be understood by one who has been in such affairs, but any reader can understand that it is not pleasant to be among a lot of enraged, shouting men who are swaying to and fro to the music of revolvers, and many there are who prefer the shelter of chairs and tables in such emergencies.

Loose lead is always detrimental to health.

Confusion reigned in the Alexis for several minutes, during which time nobody knew exactly whether he stood on his heels or head—and some had been compelled to try both ways—but they grew calmer as fighting ceased and some one called for lights.

Then out from behind the bar crawled its presiding genius, and in a short time the old flow of illumination had been revived.

A survey of the field at once followed.

Captain Nevada was not present. He had gone from their sight and hearing, though two or three men walked up to the bar, a little later, and testified that he had left his cards behind—leaden affairs that made their mark where they hit.

By some strange chance, not a fatally wounded man was to be found to tell of his desperate dash for liberty.

The evening had had its tragedy, however, for over by the table first mentioned young Ball lay dead in the midst of his dishonorable career, but the man who had stabbed him was not far away.

Miguel Perez lay on the floor, firmly held by Sawtooth Sam, Carter and another man, and a howl arose from the miners.

"String him up! Hang ther murderer!"

Some one interfered for Miguel, and pleaded self-defense; but the spectators were not in a mood to listen to such talk.

Ball had not attempted personal violence to the Mexican, and there was no excuse for his untimely taking off; while the fact that Perez, disguised, was there as Captain Nevada's partner, told very heavily against him.

If he was not of the road-agent band, then appearances were disastrously against him, argued the rough but honest miners.

Miguel, for his part, lay on the floor and glared defiance. He had not yet had time to reflect sufficiently to see what he had lost.

Despite the interesting state of affairs, Canyon Dave did not forget the note he had received. The vague hope that it might have come from Incognito, and that he might obtain light on the subject which had brought him to Silver Spur, would have called him from almost any society.

He went outside and, at the corner of the hotel, found a boy in waiting as he had been told.

He nodded slightly.

"You were waiting for me?" he questioned.

"I was. Follow me," was the terse reply.

"Whither?"

"Not beyond the village. Do not fear."

The boy showed an inclination to avoid unnecessary words, and Dave looked in vain to discover his identity. In the darkness, discoveries were not easy, while the drooping hat of the youth was almost like a mask.

Canyon Dave shut his teeth, and prepared to

follow where the boy led. Within the last month his previously matter-of-fact life had been full of mystery, but he was getting on familiar terms with it and cared little.

If this affair was but of the ordinary kind he was willing to humor his unknown correspondent, while if it referred to Incognito, he would follow to the end.

His guide passed several cabins at the rear and then paused before one which was dark and silent. He pushed the door open.

"Enter!" he quietly said.

"What is there?" Dave suspiciously asked. "The caboose is as dark as a tomb. I hope you won't think me bashful, but an era of lead and saltpeter has dawned on Silver Spur, and I hold my life sacred."

The boy brushed past him and stepped inside the door.

"I am going to light the room and then go for the one who sent for you," he said, explanatorily. "If you discover an enemy, turn your revolver on me."

Somewhat reassured, David entered. The boy struck a light, keeping his back to the visitor, and then glided through a door which plainly led to another room.

The mountaineer found himself the only occupant of the apartment he had entered, and after a deliberate survey he helped himself to a chair and sat playing with the hilt of his knife.

He smiled and seemed at ease, but was really wide awake and watching for treachery.

Five minutes passed, and then the door opened and a lady came out. Canyon Dave looked, recognized her, and gracefully removed his hat.

The new-comer was Persis Ripley.

"Good-evening, Mr. Canton," she said, with a gracious smile.

"Good-evening, Miss Ripley."

"I see you remember me."

"Oh, yes! I have not forgotten your adventure."

"Then I need not go through the formality of an introduction. You received my note, as your presence proves. I trust my messenger performed his part satisfactorily?"

"Quite. Yes, the boy was all right."

A pause ensued. Persis looked down at her hands, which were toying with a ribbon, knotted, which ornamented her dress. The garment was neat and very fashionable for Silver Spur; her whole attire was becoming; and by some feminine artifice she had made herself look strangely young.

Canyon Dave was perplexed to know what was coming. Why had this woman, whom he had so strangely met before, called him to a remote cabin when an interview in the hotel would have been far easier? He remembered the peculiar wording of the note and preferred not to surmise.

When a member of the female sex assures a man, verbally or by letter, that she "will risk all for him," it is time for him to be on the alert. Unceasing vigilance is the price of liberty.

"I suppose you are filled with wonder at my singular course, Mr. Canton," Persis said, suddenly lifting her head.

"A little, madam, I confess."

"Well, then, I wish to say to you that I have become possessed of a most important secret, one which concerns your very life."

Canyon Dave thought of Incognito, and his heart bounded, but he managed to keep an outward calmness.

"In that case I shall be pleased to hear it," he confessed, with a smile.

"In order to divulge what I know, I must throw myself on your chivalry and nobility."

"The last words are rather weighty, madam, but I reckon I can stagger through. Proceed!"

"I have a brother who is a member of the band of Captain Nevada."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. Oh! poor, poor Larry! how my heart bleeds for him! Listen, sir, before you think him guilty. He was captured by them six months ago and threatened with death if he did not swear fidelity to their infamous league. He took the oath to save his life, and all this while, until recently, has been a menial in their lair. Of late, they have sent him outside, but always with one companion, who watches him narrowly. I came to Silver Spur to be near him—he is but a boy—and last night he wrote me a long letter. There was much in it not of interest to you; but among other things he divulged the fact that you were menaced by danger from a most merciless foe. This is why I have called you here."

CHAPTER XXIII.

MIGUEL HAS A CLOSE CALL.

THE mountaineer had listened calmly to this address, but he had thought busier than Persis knew. If she had known of the scene at the Alexis, she might have preferred to postpone her revelation until a later time.

Canyon Dave put several points of evidence together while she talked. He had often seen her with Miguel Perez, and they had seemed to be very good friends, but now Perez had been discomfited at the Alexis under circumstances

which seemed to prove him a member of Captain Nevada's band.

If, then, she was so friendly with him, it did not look as though she had any great dislike for the band in general; and he took the liberty of deeming her brother a myth.

He would listen further and watch developments.

"I sympathize most heartily with your brother," he said, earnestly, "and I trust he will be able to effect his escape. But—excuse me from rushing from your sorrow to my peril—what is the danger that menaces me?"

"It comes from Captain Nevada."

"Ah! I have met the man. Well, why does he desire my dissolution?"

"It would make a long story, in detail, but I can give it briefly," said Miss Ripley, sweetly.

"Do you know a young lady named Augusta Hackett?"

Her eyes were fixed upon his face, searchingly, despite the mild expression she maintained; but if she looked for a telltale change of expression, it did not come. His face remained perfectly calm.

"Gus Hackett? Yes, I have met her."

"Then, I need only say that, before your coming to Silver Spur, she was the betrothed of Captain Nevada. I beg that you will not let this destroy your good opinion of her—I am a woman, like herself, and I feel for her. I can imagine how the brilliancy and good looks of this outlaw won her girlish fancy and blinded her to the fact that he was an outlaw. Then, too, her visits to his cave naturally influenced one so addicted to a life of freedom."

Persis paused to let the last sentence have due effect.

"Of course," said David, blandly.

"Nevada, however, has seen fit to be jealous of you, and he swears that he will kill you on sight."

"Bloodthirsty, isn't he?" quoth the mountaineer, coolly.

"He is a perfect demon. My brother has seen him shoot down members of his own band in cold blood just because they murmured at his orders."

"In that, at least, he is right. He deserves a monument for it. But, *per contra*, I can't agree to furnish my body as a target for his skill."

"I beg that you will be careful," said Miss Ripley, anxiously.

"Rest assured, I will. Some day, this road-agent will receive a blue pill which will interfere with his digestion. He needs rigid medical treatment."

The speaker tapped his revolvers.

"You are very brave," said Persis, admiringly.

"Up in the grizzly mountains, they called me Thunderbolt Dave," he added, with a very serious face.

"Ah!" murmured Persis, clasping her hand in rapturous appreciation of the fact.

Behind his grave face, Canyon Dave was laughing at her. He read her marvelously well and was boasting as he would not have done before another woman in Silver Spur.

What would have come next is uncertain. Just then a long-drawn howl, as of many voices, penetrated to their hearing, and the mountaineer started. He had heard such howls before when angry men united their voices, and, remembering the late scene at the Alexis, he betrayed unusual interest.

"What is it?" asked Persis, as another note floated to their ears.

"I have a suspicion, but I may be wrong. Permit me to open the door."

He did so, and saw a confused mass of men rushing toward the upper end of the street, while their yells arose with greater distinctness.

"There is a riot—what can it mean?" Persis asked, and it was plain she suspected nothing.

Canyon Dave looked at her sharply. He had reasons for believing she ought to know that something unusual was afoot, but if she did, she gave no sign. Suspecting what he did, there was some pity in his face, adventure though he believed her to be.

"I have reason to think Judge Lynch is on the move. That sounds like his war-whoop, and I know a reason why he should be out. There was a broil at the Alexis, to-night, and two masked men were proved to be road-agents. One was Captain Nevada, but he went free by muscle-bail. The other, I reckon, is the attraction of this show."

He pointed to the yelling men, who were now almost at hand.

"Who was he?" Persis abruptly asked.

"Miguel Perez was his name."

She put one hand out against the side of the door, but Dave could see no emotion on her face save that natural to any woman in like circumstances. If she cared anything for Miguel Perez, her face betrayed nothing.

He turned from her to look at the mob, which had halted less than thirty yards away. Their object in seeking that part of the village was soon made clear. Several men ran inside one of the houses and a joist like piece of timber was run a few feet out of an upper window.

Then, underneath, a table was placed and the prisoner was hustled forward.

Means for an execution were not plentiful in Silver Spur.

Canyon Dave and Persis gazed as though fascinated. They saw a struggling man hurried forward and mounted on the table, but even then he did not quail. He sprang into the air and dashed both feet, tied together as they were, against one of the miners, and both fell flat.

The prisoner was again raised, and a suddenly started torch cast its light on the face of Miguel Perez. All his hot Mexican blood was at the front, but that he lacked the cowardice of many of his race was fully proved.

He stood bolt upright, without a tremor, but only furious because he could do no more mischief.

A rope was brought, one end was noosed over his head, and then, as the loose part was flung over the projecting timber, the further end fell among the crowd and only one strong pull was needed to send him to eternity.

But a hush fell upon the crowd as one of their number moved to the front—doubtless the Judge Lynch of the occasion.

Canyon Dave started; the lawless judge was Otis Sprague!

The young miner looked at the prisoner with manifest emotion.

"Miguel Perez," he solemnly said, "you are in a grave and terrible situation; you are fearfully near the great divide, and your eternal Judge stands on the other side. I don't want to preach to you, for every man is his own master for all of me, except wherein he violates law and honor. You are here charged with being a confederate of Captain Nevada, but I hope you can clear yourself. What have you to say?"

"I come of a race that talks with the knife—" "In the back!"

It was an honest but untimely voice which interrupted Miguel. Sprague ordered silence, and the prisoner glared at his accuser.

"Dog of a Yankee!" he hissed, "I spit on you as on a cur. Who accuses Miguel Perez of stabbing men in the back? Let each and every one step forward, and I will fight them all. First, let him who has already howled like a sneaking coyote, come forward. Dog! I'll fight you knife to knife, or revolver against revolver!"

"Peace!" said Sprague. "Let us have no more talk like this. Miners, I command silence. And you, prisoner, speak only to me. Tell me of Captain Nevada and his band if you would live. Who is he, really, where is his cave and what are his numbers?"

"Ha! ha! I will tell nothing!" declared Perez. "You say I am of his band. Well, appearances are against me; I deny nothing. Be happy over what you suspect; it is seldom that ideas percolate into your thick heads."

"Miguel Perez, if you die here it is your own fault," said Sprague, sternly. "Lead us to Captain Nevada's lair, and you are saved, but if you play the fool your fate is sealed. It is talk or die! Which do you choose?"

Canyon Dave turned and touched Persis on the arm. Her face was in shadow, and he believed her stillness the horror of sorrow and despair.

"Come away!" he said; "this is no place for you."

She looked at him calmly.

"I am a woman of the border—of the mines," she steadily said.

"But, madam, you don't understand. That doomed wretch—that is—Perez will be hanged unless he tells them what they wish."

"What of it?" she coldly asked.

Deep down in her heart was a hope that it would be so. She had too many men to please in Silver Spur. She aspired to beguile Judge Parmenter and win his gold, to use Miguel as long as he was useful, and to marry David Canton at the end.

If Judge Lynch hanged Perez, one millstone would be removed.

Before the mountaineer could answer, another man rushed forward from somewhere, staggering toward the door like one intoxicated. He caught at the side of the doorway, and his breath came in great sobs, as though he had run until barely able to stand or respire.

Canyon Dave started; the new-comer was Incognito.

Then the long fingers of the mysterious man closed upon the mountaineer's arm in a crushing grasp.

"Save that man!" he cried, pointing to the inopportune gallowes. "Save him; I command it. Make haste—away! away!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WARNING—HARPER'S PROPOSAL.

THAT same evening, but previous to the fight at the Alexis, Gus Hackett was returning to Judge Parmenter's, after a visit to her father's cabin. All arguments to prevail on Brad to change his quarters had fallen on barren soil; stand by his home he would even though Captain Nevada knocked out the corner-stone.

Gus had a good deal of his firm nature, and only for Edna Parmenter, for whom she had

come to feel a strong friendship, she would herself have been found at the old place, but Edna ruled the day and Gus still lived with the judge's family.

On this occasion she had nearly reached the house when her name was pronounced and she turned to see a man striding after her.

He was a stranger, but with her rifle in her hand, it was not her nature to be alarmed, even though the new-comer, a tall, slenderly-built man, was so wrapped up in a cloak and hat as to raise the suspicion that he was disguised.

"Did you call?" she calmly asked.

"Yes, young lady. I would like to speak with you for a short time."

"Well, I am listening."

"Let us step a little from the street," suggested the unknown.

For a moment Gus hesitated, but with her rifle in her hands she felt capable of caring for herself and went as requested.

To her, this mysterious man seemed an utter stranger, but had Canyon Dave been present, he would have recognized "Incognito."

The latter did not go far enough to awaken suspicion, but just beyond the sight of the ordinary travelers of the street.

"I suppose," he then began, abruptly, "that you are puzzled to know what I can want with you. I am not here to ask a personal favor, for I am well supplied with worldly goods; but to do you a kindness brought about by the friendly feeling I entertain for you."

"Well, I don't know in what way you can benefit me, for I do not feel in need of help, but I shall be just as grateful if it is as you say," the girl replied, guardedly.

"Some people are in need of food and money, others of kind words, and still others of muscular defense," said Incognito, quietly. "There are few who don't have some pitfalls in their life paths. Poverty, neglect, and persecution make a hideous trio that cause much damage and sorrow."

Gus did not feel inclined to deny this philosophical assertion, so she murmured a simple affirmative.

"You are young and innocent," continued the man of mystery, "and your worst danger is from those who hide an evil heart behind a fair face."

"Sir!" said she, coldly.

"Be calm, young lady; I mean you well. Let me now explain. You know a young man commonly called Canyon Dave. Circumstances throw you two together, and you have seen each other often, since. I would bid you beware of him. I know him better than you, and I say that he hides a fiend's heart behind his smile. I have known him for years."

"Why do you tell me this?" asked Gus, with an unbelieving smile.

"Because," answered Incognito, with sudden energy. "I would save the bird from the serpent. Miss Hackett, I am not blind. I can see what will be the end of your acquaintance, though you may be blind. You are learning to love this smooth-tongued—Stop! hear me patiently, for I swear I mean only your good!"

Incognito spoke with great solemnity.

"Go on!" said Gus, recovering her calmness.

"I will be brief. There are two reasons why you should not think seriously of Canyon Dave. The first is because he is base at heart, a gambler, a thief—ay, there is innocent blood on his hands. Such men are not for you, Miss Hackett. The second reason is that another woman has a claim upon him."

"Well!"

Gus was listening patiently, but she was not very strongly impressed. In her opinion, such a secret revelation did not amount to much. Canyon Dave might have enemies—who has not?—and in such a way as this they would prefer to strike him.

"There is a way to test the truth of what I have told you. When you see the man, ask him why he came to Silver Spur. He will probably say, to dig gold. Then, look him sharply in the face and say: 'Did you not come here to find a young woman?' Ask him this, and, my word for it, he will be confused. He *did* come for that purpose; I swear it; but he has not yet found his runaway, so he seeks to play the gallant to you."

Incognito folded his arms and looked steadily into the darkness.

"You make a singular statement," said Gus, still calmly. "I suppose you are willing to give your name as a guarantee of good faith?"

"On the contrary, I must remain unknown. I am risking something to tell you what I have, but I would save you from a villain. Farewell!"

He turned aside, after this dramatic address, but Gus spoke sharply.

"Stop!" she said.

"Well?" he questioned, pausing.

"You must not leave me now. Thus far, you have done your work very unsatisfactorily. I do not believe in stabs in the dark, nor do I see any use for them—"

"Enough!" he said, curtly. "I do not ask you to believe, nor do I care but little any way. I did think it my duty to warn you, but

youth is rash and unbelieving. Have your own way, girl. Farewell!"

Once more he turned and strode away, and, though she again called to him, he kept the pace until darkness concealed him from view.

He left Gus confused, angry and uncertain. She was disposed to distrust and disbelieve the unknown, and to see in his warning the work of an enemy to Canyon Dave; but where is the person who is so loyal that a shadow of doubt does not enter their minds before an earnest assertion?

They may struggle against the feeling, as against the nightmare, but we are born prone to believe what is derogatory rather than that which ennobs.

And Canyon Dave and Gus Hackett had not yet talked of the future.

She turned slowly toward Parmenter's, but had gone only a few yards when she met Thomas Harper face to face, and so that both necessarily paused.

The encounter was annoying to Miss Hackett. She had not seen Harper, except at a distance, since they were prisoners of Captain Nevada, while the memory of their meeting among the hills, previous to their capture, did not serve to make him a desirable acquaintance.

Now she would have passed on without a word, but he spoke quickly:

"One moment, miss, I beg of you. I am going to my hotel and will detain you only a short time. Have you entirely recovered from your adventure?"

"Yes, sir," she answered, coldly.

Her manner was not encouraging, but he did not expect it. He said a few words about their mutual captivity, taking care not to overdo the matter, and then wound around to the subject nearest his heart.

"Miss Hackett," he earnestly said, "I have a proposition to make to you. Stop! it is not what you think. I am not going to make a fool of myself. I am aware that I am thirty years your senior, and I do not aspire to matrimonial honors. I have, however, a plan in my mind which will make you the heiress of a hundred thousand dollars, and at the same time fill my own pockets. What do you think of that?"

He spoke with confidence, for, judging by his own nature, he believed that poor people were ready to sell their own souls for worldly gain, and he had settled on Gus to fill an important niche in life.

"I think it a 'salted claim,'" she promptly replied.

"It is not—I swear to it. Listen, Miss Hackett: In a certain part of the world there is a great fortune awaiting an owner. The only heiress is a young woman who has been sought for but will never be found. Now, it is within my power to produce any girl of a brunette type and put her forward as the genuine heiress; whereupon she becomes the sole possessor of the hundred thousand."

"And how much do you gain?" was the quick inquiry.

"The girl I select shall sign a paper agreeing to give me ten thousand dollars when the fortune is within her grasp."

"You are frank."

"Do you suppose I would bring so much wealth to any person for nothing? Thank you, no; I am not a philanthropist. In this matter, the only claim I make to fairness is that I will deal with my substitute heiress in an upright manner. I have come to you, first of all."

The alluring bait had been skillfully presented, but Gus was not for a moment tempted. Dishonesty and fraud were not ingredients of her nature, and never could be. Consequently she did not give the matter a thought in that direction, but another idea entered her mind.

She disliked Harper, and, now that she found him contemplating such a crime, she became ambitious to defeat and expose him. If she at once declined, and expressed her scorn, she would hear no more from him, and his scheme would go on with a less scrupulous woman as the central figure.

Realizing all this, she quickly laid her plans.

She outwardly showed hesitation, questioned him at some length concerning the fortune, the dangers to be encountered in securing it, and in every way acted as she believed a grasping, unscrupulous woman would do under such circumstances.

Harper, already exultant, answered as he saw fit, but wisely kept back all that could possibly betray him. He even led her to believe the fortune east of the Mississippi.

CHAPTER XXV.

TOM TRUEAXE'S OPINION.

Gus hesitated, looked thoughtful, and ground her little heel into the earth. Harper watched her, anxious for the success of his plan, and with no small amount of admiration behind his business exterior. The idea was working in his mind that he might some day be able to say whom the girl should marry.

While they talked, neither suspected that a third party was listening to their words, but such was a fact. They stood near a cabin, and in its shadow a burly man lay and heard all.

"I must have time to think of this," said

Gus, at last, in an abrupt way. "It is a momentous decision to make. I am well enough off here, but—but it would be nice to be my own mistress."

"With a hundred thousand at your back, eh?" reminded Harper, pleasantly.

"True, true! The prize is worth having, and it may be I—will throw off the dust of this town forever. Give me a day, two days, to think of it?"

"A week, if you wish," said Harper, delightfully.

"Very well. I will think earnestly, and when my decision is made, you shall have a note to that effect. Is that satisfactory?"

It was; so much so that Harper could scarcely conceal his joy; but he managed to answer calmly, parting words were said and they separated.

As Harper turned toward his hotel, the eaves-dropper quietly arose and followed him.

"The scheme begins to work," thought Harper, as he walked slowly on. "I am baffled in my attempt to discover the real heiress; Parmenter alone knows who she is, and he will keep his secret; so I must bring this Gus Hackett to the front. She looks as much like the Brownings as the Parmenter girls do, though all the resemblance any of the lot can claim is in their brunette type of beauty. The Hackett will pass muster tolerably well, so far as looks are concerned, and she has the wit to keep up the imposition. I will turn my back on the real heiress forever."

He paused and looked thoughtfully at vacancy.

"There will be quicksands in my path," he muttered, "but I must risk them. First of all, Cleon must be forever silenced. He would not agree to this cheat; he must die. Again, I have been fool enough to unbosom myself to Parmenter. Suppose, when I have become fairly fixed under the new regime, that he should appear and denounce my queen as an impostor? It would be bad—bad for both of us; for I swear that I would stab him to the heart if necessary."

Just then a heavy hand fell upon Harper's shoulder, and he gave a yell and a bound. Coming at such a moment, the interruption was most startling.

When he wheeled, however, it was with a revolver in his hand; but the man who had thus saluted him was standing with his arms akimbo, looking innocent enough.

"Hello, old stock! How's your general health? Drapped down on yer sorter suddint, didn't it? It is a way I hev, an' can't be cured. Hope you'll excuse me on ther strength o' ole friendship."

"Who the devil are you?" Harper angrily demanded.

"Wal, now that is scurious. I'd 'a' knowed you ef I'd see'd you in prison or church. Onst let me fix a man's jaw in my head an' it is thar, figuratively speakin', o' course; not in a letteral sorter way."

"Be silent, or speak common sense. Who are you?" Harper said, impatiently.

"Tommy Trueaxe is my name."

Harper started and growled a curse. He had not forgotten the man whom he had interviewed at Coyote Cliff, and who had then so calmly revealed the cheat of sixteen years.

"I remember you," he growled, wondering what evil wind had blown the fellow to Silver Spur, and if in him he must encounter a new enemy.

"I reckoned yer would," said Trueaxe, laughing.

"You have left Coyote Cliff, I see."

"Yas. Et's an ole sayin' that while ther lamp holds out ter slicker ther vilist sinner may trade an' dicker, an' I concluded ter foller ther axiom, now that my bank was busted."

"Yes," said Harper, absently.

"How goes ther battle, ole pard?"

"Bad."

"How so?"

"I am just where I was when I left Coyote Cliff. Parmenter refuses to divulge, and I don't know which one of his putative daughters is really Miriam Browning."

"I jedged ther brook was flowin' that way by what yer said ter Gus Hackett," coolly observed Trueaxe.

Harper started, changed color, and then broke out in hot anger:

"Curse you! you have been listening to our words; you have acted the spy."

"So I hev, but it was out o' devotion to you. Thort you needed a witness. Loid love yer! women are like Californy whisky; ther best on 'em are so mixed in with irreligious drugs that you can't depend on 'em."

"Enough. Don't waste words. You have come to this town, and I presume your object is to live on me. I have expected it from the first. You have come, and you know my present plan."

"Ter palm off a false heiress fur ther Simon Pure article. Yas," said Trueaxe.

"Well, granting it, do you want to make yourself useful?"

"Yas."

"Are you scrupulous?"

"Not a bit."

"Very well. I will give you a hundred dollars to kill the negro whom you saw at Coyote Cliff with me. Do the work scientifically, so that no ugly suspicions will be aroused. Pick a quarrel with him, and shoot to kill. Can you do it?"

"Well, I guess I can, jest as easy. Scroopies? Nary, boss, nary. What's a human life? No more nor a pebble. S'pose I chuck a stun ther size o' a walnut inter ther sea. Does it leave any perceptible vacancy in ther world? Nary. Does it fill any perceptible gap in ther ocean? Nary. Squire, it are my opinion that we need a King Nero, or Herod, or Hannibowl. I for-git which it was—ter kill off ther babies an' s'purfluous men. Ther'fore—"

"Never mind the oration. If the bargain is formed, we will now separate."

Some parting words were said, and Harper once more started for the Alexis. He was in a fresh rage and panic over the arrival of Tom Trueaxe. The man had the power to ruin him.

"He has sealed his own fate by coming here," the plotter grimly muttered. "He knows too much. Still, it may be just as well. He will remove Cleon, and when the work is done, my own hand shall remove him. Better by far that he had remained at Coyote Cliff, unless his opinion of human life is sweeping enough to include himself."

At that moment the lynchers came forth from the Alexis, bearing Miguel Perez. He had been hastily tried and condemned. Suspicion pointed to him strongly as an accomplice of Captain Nevada, and, besides, the death of Edward Ball lay at his door. True, this last deed could not in law be deemed any more than manslaughter, but form and ceremony count for but little in wild places.

Harper paid no attention to what he regarded merely as a drunken brawl, but just as he was entering the hotel a hand was laid upon his arm.

He turned and saw a tall man, strangely wrapped up in a cloak and big hat.

"I beg your pardon," said the latter, "but what means this disturbance? It looks like a lynching affair."

"Very likely it is, but I don't trouble myself about such affairs. If people want their necks broken, let them dabble in villainy, that's all."

With these words he abruptly opened the door and passed through, leaving the inquirer alone. The latter, whom the reader has probably recognized as Incognito, stared after him blankly.

"Where have I heard that voice?" he muttered. "It is strangely familiar, but it dates back a long time, and I cannot place it now. Never mind; I will see him again, and maybe something of interest will come of it."

He turned from the door and went to that opening into the saloon. For reasons of his own he desired to know what trouble had occurred inside and who had been borne away by the mob.

Pushing the door a little open, he saw upon a table all that remained of Edward Ball. Two men were seated beside the body, like watchers, but the room had no other occupant excepting Joe, the bar-tender.

Incognito softly entered, purchased a drink of whisky and then addressed Joe.

"There has been a fight here, I see."

"Yas, a serious skrimmage," Joe acknowledged.

"More than one man harmed?"

"Not yet, but I reckon another one will soon toot his horn on t'other side o' ther divide. It's a mighty bad deal, too."

"Did you know the other man?"

Incognito was talking carelessly, for though he suspected he might know the man who had accompanied Judge Lynch to the gallows, he did not suppose he really cared in particular.

"I did that; he was one o' our reg'lar board-ers," said Joe, in an injured tone.

Incognito started.

"Hal is that so? What was his name?" he sharply asked.

"Miguel Perez."

"What?"

The single word was like a cry of pain, and Joe, greatly astonished, mechanically repeated what he had said.

"And that man is—is—"

"Gone to be hung," said Joe, obligingly.

Incognito uttered another cry, sharper and fiercer than the first, and rushed from the saloon like a madman.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A CHAMPION FOR MIGUEL.

CANYON DAVE had been startled by the appearance of Incognito, but when the latter uttered his unexpected command all else gave place to astonishment. Why was he called upon to save the Mexican?

For once the face of the unknown was partially visible, and from under his sombrero his eyes gleamed like those of a madman and his face was wrinkled as though from anguish.

The mountaineer stood mutely, his arm almost crushed in that sinewy hand, and Incognito stamped his foot angrily.

"I tell you, save him! save him!" he shrilly repeated, pointing to Miguel.

The Mexican had not yet felt the pressure of the noose about his neck, for Sprague was urging him to lead them to Captain Nevada's lair, but each one of the trio by the cabin knew the deed was liable to be executed at any time.

Persis Ripley heard the unknown's order and spoke quickly.

"Do nothing of the kind!" she said. "Let the wretch die as he has lived—by violence!"

Incognito turned on her like a tiger, and one mad push sent her reeling backward, to fall senseless to the floor.

Then the man of mystery turned to Canyon Dave, his eyes wilder than ever.

"I tell you to save that man!" he said.

"Why should I?" Dave asked, somewhat stubbornly.

"Because I command it! Because it is your only hope of ever learning the secret I alone possess. Will you do it?"

Would he? The unknown had touched the one chord in his nature which would vibrate for Miguel's sake. To learn that secret he would have saved even Captain Nevada, if he could.

But he hesitated now.

"I do not know as I can conquer the mob," he truthfully said.

"You must! you shall! Go! and remember it is your only hope for the future. Go!"

"One word!" said the mountaineer, turning on him with a warlike glow in his eyes; "promise me that you will tell the secret when I have saved Perez!"

"I promise," was the quick reply.

"At once?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Swear it!"

"I swear! But hasten, hasten! Holy Virgin! they pull him up! *Madre de Dios!*"

For the first time in these pages the Incognito had broken into fragmentary Spanish.

He had spoken truly. The enraged miners, angry at Miguel's stubbornness, had pulled on the robe and he was dangling in the air.

Canyon Dave sprung forward. He reached the crowd and dashed the men right and left. He was in a fever equal to that of Incognito. His whole future was at stake. All depended on the success of that miserable, villainous, crime-hardened Mexican.

It was a strange turn in the tide.

In his anxiety the mountaineer did not see that, after a taste of strangulation, Miguel had been lowered to the table for a fresh catechism, but as he pushed through the inner circle he sprung upon the table and faced the lynchers with a cocked revolver in each hand.

"Back!" he shouted, "back, you fiends! The man who pulls on that rope dies by my hand!"

A hush fell upon the mob. Miguel and Canyon Dave stood side by side, the one a man with the life blood of a fellow creature on his hands, bound, death-menaced, but sullenly defiant; the other, a miner of good repute, his eyes flashing and his cocked revolvers turned full upon his friends.

Back beyond the crowd were women who were looking on this wild scene—we might almost say, all the women of Silver Spur. We will not try to excuse them for being there, but Western women are less sensitive than those of the East, and few there were who had not come out to see Silver Spur's first attempt at lynching.

There were some who shivered with horror, even while they looked as though fascinated, and one fair girl thrilled with admiration as Canyon Dave thus came to the front.

"It is he, Edna, it is he!" she murmured, to another girl, whose arms were about her. "It is Dave, and he will save him. How brave he is!"

The speaker was Gus Hackett.

Soon the lynchers recovered from their amazement, and those who sknew little of Canyon Dave, or did not like him, began to howl angrily.

"Down with him!"

"Shoot him, ef he tries ter steal our game!"

"Hang 'em together!"

Otis Sprague quieted all these loud-mouthed fellows by a stern command.

"Silence!" he commanded. "There is no reason why we should quarrel. Canyon Dave is my pardner and we pull together every time. Dave, old fellow, you don't understand the game. This man is one of Captain Nevada's gang, and he that stabbed Ed Ball in the Alexis saloon. We don't hanker for his life, but he must swing or lead us to the outlaws' cave."

It was an address which went straight to Canyon Dave's heart. Miner as he himself was, the words seemed to come from his own brain; they were but just; but the figure of Incognito seemed to arise before his eyes and urge him on to his pledged work.

Torn by conflicting emotions, he hit upon a happy compromise.

"No! no!" he shouted. "This course will lose to you all you hope to gain. See! this man defies the rope. He will die with his secret untold. Fellow-citizens, there is a surer way—hunger will bend the stoutest will. Reprieve your prisoner, give him over to a sentence that

is a mighty conqueror, and at the same time save Silver Spur from the name of illegal lynchers."

"Hooray! that's the ticket!" shouted a voice, and Sawtooth Sam leaped upon the table beside the mountaineer.

His voice was the only one thus raised, however.

"Come, Otis Sprague," continued his partner, "let moderation prevail. Sure justice is often better than swift retribution."

"That's ther truth in a bombshell," added Sawtooth Sam. "Ther lean boss wins ther race; ther'fore, lean towards marcy."

With those words he attempted to execute a species of dance upon the table, but that structure, which had been moaning complainingly ever since he added his weight to that of the other man, suddenly gave way with a crash and Sam went headlong into the crowd.

A quick leap enabled Canyon Dave to keep his footing, but as the lynchers did not have the grace to ease up on the rope, Miguel Perez was once more left swinging in the air.

Only for a moment, however. From the outskirts of the crowd a knife flashed forward with a precision which bore it straight to the rope, and as the latter felt the touch of the keen steel, it parted, and Miguel fell to the ground.

Only one person saw who lunched that weapon. Persis Ripley, having recovered from her brief unconsciousness, had hastily donned an old suit of miner's clothes she had found in the cabin, and emerged, to all appearances, a man, to view the scene.

She it was who saw the mysterious Incognito hurl the knife.

The bad passions of the lynchers were again brought to the front by the occurrence, but their howl for vengeance died away on their lips as a cheer arose from beyond the cabin and a body of men dashed forward, surrounded by a sheet of flame as they fired at the mob.

"The road-agents!"

"Captain Nevada!"

These cries arose from the miners, and they wavered perceptibly as several of their number fell, but once more Canyon Dave pressed to the front.

"Stand firm!" he shouted. "Defend your homes, men of Silver Spur. Give shot for shot!"

Before his last words were uttered, he was himself firing briskly, a revolver in each hand, but there was no time to stay that wild rush.

Another moment and the outlaws were among them, knives, as well as revolvers, were busy, and a wild drama of destruction was commenced.

In the midst of it all a characteristic thought came to Persis Ripley. She had seen Gus Hackett beyond the crowd—the girl she hated—and it seemed to her a rare chance for removing one who had won the love of Canyon Dave.

Should she be found lifeless at the end of the affray, all blame would be laid upon road-agents.

Full of this idea she started toward the girls, her revolver ready for use, but a sudden recoiling of the miners enveloped her in their midst, and she could not at first extricate herself.

When she did, she saw Gus and Edna some distance away, fleeing toward Parmenter's.

She pursued, and by superior fleetness soon cut down the lead they had obtained. She neared them, triumph flashing from her eyes; and, at last, raised her hand to kill without warning.

The girls had not seen her.

A mere accident prevented the shot. Just as her finger was on the trigger a man turned the corner of the cabin at full speed, and before he could stop collided with Persis, and both fell to the ground.

The former was up first, revealing the black face of Cleon, but Persis lay stunned several feet away. Cleon was plainly in a state of trepidation; he glanced at her, and then, without suspecting that she was a woman, continued his headlong flight.

At almost the same time, a loud, triumphant cheer arose from the miners, an outburst which told of victory.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SPRAGUE SEEKS THE STERN PARENT.

ANOTHER morning dawned on Silver Spur, and the sun, climbing up the Sierras, found the village to all appearances as peaceful as ever. Yet there was mourning in nearly every heart, for in some of the cabins were men who would know life no more on earth—relics of the road-agents' desperate charge.

That charge had resulted in their defeat, and they had gone back in confusion to the fastnesses of Camel's Hump, minus several of their men, but as has before been said, they left their sting behind.

Still, the miners tried to rest easy under the knowledge that they had inflicted more punishment than they had received, and to bear as philosophically as possible the loss of Perez—he had been carried off by the men of the mountain.

The remainder of our characters were about the place as usual, though some of them were looking rather out of their usual good condition.

Persis Ripley kept her room all day, and was far paler than usual; and Cleon, as he moved about his orbit, like a dusky planet, seemed worried and nervous.

Neither he nor Persis knew they had met the previous night.

Canyon Dave and Otis Sprague had both escaped serious injury in the fight with the outlaws, and the former had smoothed over his interference in behalf of Miguel Perez. On his own part he had searched everywhere for In-cognito after the affray, and had at last concluded that that person had violated his pledge, and run away when once Perez was saved.

The night's work had added more than ever to the mystery surrounding the unknown.

Only one thing troubled Otis Sprague, as they loitered around the village—nobody thought of working that day—and that was, the fact that no tidings came from Parmenter's house.

None of the inmates had yet been seen, and he began to fear that Captain Nevada had struck deeper than was yet known.

He mentioned his suspicion to Canyon Dave, startling that young man a good deal, and as a result Sprague was deputized to go to the house on an expedition of investigation.

He approached the building, which was very spacious for that region, with a variety of emotions. His election to the office of Judge Lynch, the previous night, gave him a shadow of official excuse for calling, but at the same time, it would be his first appearance under that roof and he knew Judge Parmenter had never looked on him with favor since he dared to be seen more than casually in the company of the fair Edna.

The judge did not think he was himself any better than a poor man, but he wanted that luckless class of human beings to keep their distance from his daughters.

He did not believe in equalizing the good things of life.

Sprague rapped timidly, but luck was on his side. The door was opened by a Chinese servant who had not learned the first duties of his position; and as a result, our wielder of the pick found himself conducted to the sitting-room without the formality of an announcement.

Then Hop Ching Willie promptly retired, leaving Sprague looking on a singular scene.

Judge Parmenter was in the room with his three daughters, but though the ship seemed pretty firm under their feet, figuratively speaking, the flag of distress cast a very broad shadow over them all.

Helen and Milicent sat side by side, their eyes suspiciously red, Edna was on her knees, her face buried in her hands, and above her towered Judge Parmenter, red-faced, heated, angry and sorrowful.

It was a scene which brought Sprague to a sudden stop, while Parmenter, who had been gesticulating with a folded paper, turned his eyes on the intruder and seemed actually petrified by astonishment.

Worse than all the rest, the frozen look on his face did not herald peace on earth and good will to men.

His terrible glare startled and confused Sprague, who stood twirling his hat like an awkward school-boy.

"I—I beg your pardon!" he began, stammeringly.

Judge Parmenter helped him out.

"You infernal villain!" he roared, "how dared you come here?"

Sprague was sensitive, and even the glare of the "stern parent" could not make him silently bow to the accusation of being an infernal villain; so he coaxed up a good deal of courage, and tersely demanded:

"Do you think I am after your silver?"

"I suppose you are after a beggar's daughter!" shouted the judge.

"Not that I am aware of. I came to inquire after your health," said Sprague, pacifically.

"My health? Oh, you infernal villain! How dare you add insult to injury? Sir, repeat those words, and I will throw you from the house!"

"If they are offensive I will withdraw them," said Sprague, again nettled. "Permit me to inquire after your daughters."

He laid a marked emphasis on the last word, but to his surprise Parmenter began catching at his collar as though choking.

"Good Heavens! what is the matter?" Sprague demanded. "Have you received bad news here? If so, I will hasten to withdraw. I see you hold a letter—it may not be one pleasant to you. If so—"

He paused.

Parmenter sunk into a chair, while Edna, arising from her kneeling position, took three steps only to fall on her knees again—this time at Sprague's feet.

"Forbear—forbear!" she brokenly murmured. "Be generous in your victory!"

If the building in which he was standing had suddenly been gifted with life, and had arisen and walked on legs, poor Sprague could not have been more astonished. That all this family should be in sorrow was one of the possibilities

of life, but why they should blame him for it he could not see.

His "victory!" In the name of Christopher Columbus, who or what had he conquered?

Perhaps there was something infectious in the air; at any rate, he, too, dropped into a chair, and seemed as weak as though just out of a hospital.

"I suggest a new deal, with all hands above the board," he meekly said.

The judge and Edna being practically out of the race (if we may speak so disrespectfully), Miss Helen took up the gauntlet.

"You great brute! you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" she cried warmly.

"It is a pity Judge Lynch didn't get you last night," added Milicent.

Poor Sprague mopped his perspiring forehead on his sleeve, in lieu of a handkerchief, but his courage was coming back. He could bear a good deal from the woman he loved, and it was policy to keep a clear channel for the "stern parent" when he ground his tomahawk and took to the war-path; but Sprague could not recollect any law that compelled him to submit to such soul harrowing language from the female relatives of the future Mrs. Sprague.

"There may be a reason for all this," he said, arising, and speaking in a ringing voice, "but I swear by my life that I do not know what it is. I come here on a very simple errand, but I am most strangely greeted. Permit me to ask what is the trouble?"

His honest indignation was not without effect. All seemed impressed by it, Edna looked at him in a startled way, and then lifted the paper which had fallen from her father's hands and brought it to him.

With one hand resting on his shoulder, she eagerly asked:

"Did you write that?"

Sprague read before answering, and this is what he saw, boldly written:

"JUDGE PARMENTER:—

"You have in the past shown me very clearly that you do not want me near your house; that you do not want me to speak to your daughter, Edna. Your daughter? No: for I have learned that not one drop of your blood flows in her veins; that she is a foundling, picked up from the street by you; in fact, a beggar's daughter. Having learned this, I laugh in your face, for I am certainly as good as she, and hereafter, I defy you!"

"OTIS SPRAGUE."

The miner read this remarkable letter through in silence, but the keen eyes of love were on his face, and as he raised his head, Edna threw herself upon his breast.

"Forgive me! forgive me for doubting you one moment!" she murmured.

"Where did that letter come from?" he demanded, in amazement.

"It was left here half an hour ago by a strange Chinaman, who said that it was from you. There was another. Read!"

From her pocket she produced another document in the same writing. It was addressed to her, but need not be repeated here. It notified her that the writer had learned that she was not Parmenter's daughter, but a "beggar's brat," and exulted over the fact and the discomfiture of "old Parmenter."

The entire tone of the letter was coarse, unfeeling and vicious, and as Sprague read he could not wonder at the way in which he had been greeted.

Indignation had been at the front, and his polite speeches had been looked upon as smooth and elaborate insults.

Encouraged by the course pursued by Edna, Sprague made a clear and emphatic denial of any and all connection with the letters, regarding the origin of which he had not the slightest idea, and even the judge, who was not blind, soon came to the front and begged his pardon.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE JUDGE'S TROUBLES CONTINUE.

IT having been decided that Sprague was in no way connected with the writing of the mysterious letters, and peace having been firmly established, Edna's lover sat down with the rest of the family to consider the matter.

Parmenter was thoroughly ashamed of the part he had acted, and for the time, at least, he saw Sprague look lovingly at Edna without a word or look of reproof.

Still, it was not a thoroughly happy circle.

Edna, on reading her own letter, had gone to her putative father with rapidly-falling tears to ask if it was true that she was not his daughter. He had promptly declared that it was an infamous falsehood, but the suspicion, once started, was not so easily put at rest.

The judge, on his part, was troubled beyond the power of concealment. He now believed that the letters had come from Thomas Harper, and though he had resolved to seek him and force a quarrel, which should end the matter, he did not know how far the man had gone in his revelation role, and feared that the charge would become common property.

Edna watched him, noting his perturbation, and the shadow reflected from her own face increased his uneasiness, until he acted wholly unlike himself.

Without mentioning Harper, he said the let-

ters had emanated from either a malicious person or one who desired to practice blackmail. If the latter, he intended to give back blow for blow.

Sprague was wise enough not too tarry too long. The judge might undergo another mental change if time was allowed him; so the young miner said good-day and left the house.

He did not go in a very unhappy mood, for, though he sincerely sympathized with Edna, he could not but see that that little comedy which greeted his arrival had resulted to his good.

He only hoped the judge's humble mood would continue.

The latter, however, was only beginning a day of singular experience. Sprague had not been gone an hour when another caller was announced. Hop Ching Willie had received a few instructions since Sprague's abrupt entrance, and though Parmenter was surprised at learning that a negro was seeking audience, he bade Hop admit him.

He came, and proved to be Cleon, who, judging from his expression, had struck a vein of ill luck somewhere.

"Well, my man, what can I do for you?" the judge kindly inquired.

"I's done come on a peccolior errant, sah," said the gray-headed negro, dismally.

"Never mind that, uncle; I'm used to peculiarities and earthquakes just at present. Spread your sail and use your trumpet right away."

"Massa, I's a lost an' undone niggah."

"Lost? Some mistake at the express office, I suppose," quoth Parmenter, facetiously.

"I don't know how to 'proach you, sah."

"In that case, don't approach at all; keep your seat. But, uncle, time is precious. State your business at once, if you please."

The judge was strangely pleasant and polite, but he was sure there was no harm in this gray-haired negro, and he intended to use him well to make amends for what he had said to Sprague.

"Wal, den, sah, it am all about dat one ob your dorders dat ain't your dorder. I trotted her on my knee when she wasn't bigger'n a squash, sah, an' dis ole niggah don't forget. Bless de good Lord! no, sah; dat he don't. I was Massa Browning's slave, sah, onc't, but he freed me, an' I trotted Miss Miriam on my knee. She was de only—"

Thus far the judge had sat and heard in silence, but his fist suddenly came down on the table in a way which made that structure groan.

"What in the fiend's name do you mean?" he thundered, glaring furiously at Cleon.

"It am a fact, sah," chattered the negro. "I trotted her on my knee, sah, an' it was my right as an ole family sarbant an'—"

"Hold on! hold on!" said Parmenter. "Let us begin anew."

He viciously pulled open a drawer and made a grasp for his whisky flask.

"Yes, sah," said Cleon, meekly. "I trotted her—"

"Silence! Wait until I give you leave to speak."

Cleon sighed and relapsed into utter quiet, but after a view of the ceiling through the bottom of the flask, the judge faced him with an ominous frown.

"Who sent you here?" he demanded.

"Nobody, sah. I came—"

"Don't lie. Was it Tom Harper?"

"Bressed Israel! no sah. I wouldn't hab him know dat I was here fur all de worl', sah."

"You wouldn't?—why not?"

"He would kill me, sah."

"Um!"

Parmenter stared at the negro for a long time in silence. He studied his face intently. To all appearances, it was an honest, sober, faithful nature there stamped, and Cleon was plainly alarmed at something.

"My friend," said the judge, suddenly, but mildly, "will you oblige me by explaining all you know about this singular affair?"

Cleon explained. He told of the abduction of Miriam Browning, sixteen years before, of the death of Silas, and of the efforts made by Harper to find the missing heiress. It was a long story, but he told it tolerably well, and among the other historical points, one arose to positive certainty. Cleon had "trotted" the lost girl on his knee.

Parmenter listened and studied the negro, with the astuteness born of his legal experience, and at the end he was sure he had heard nothing but the truth. Two facts he grasped with a positive feeling—Harper was a rascal, and Cleon was merely unlucky in being in such company.

"Harper is working solely for his own good," he thought. "As I look at it, he stole the girl, sixteen years ago, and now he seeks to give to her what is hers simply because the will of Browning makes it an object. So!—perhaps I will take a hand in this game, after all."

His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by Cleon, who flung himself down on his knees, clasped his arms about those of the judge and, with great tears rolling down his cheeks, besought him to make known the identity of his young mistress.

"She is one ob dem free," he said, pathetically, "an' dis ole niggah will break him heart ef he don't know which. Neber mind Tom Harper, but tell ole Cleon, fur he trotted her on his knee when she was a chile!"

The judge was visibly moved, but, before he could answer, Hop Ching Willie announced another visitor—Thomas Harper.

Parmenter became at once the keen man of the world. He raised Cleon to his feet, led him forward and, opening a small door, showed a closet inside.

"Get in there and keep as silent as death," he ordered. "We will see what we can make Thomas Harper say. Do you hear?"

"Yes, sah, but for de lub ob goodness, don't tell Massa Tom which is my young missis. I trotted—"

The balance of the sentence was inaudible as the judge closed the door upon him.

Harper entered, nodded stiffly and helped himself to a chair. Parmenter looked at him beligerently, and the look was returned in kind.

"Well?" questioned the judge, as an opening.

"I have come," said Harper, slowly, "to give you a last chance. I cannot believe that a man of your wealth and social position would commit such an enormity as to rob an orphan of her inheritance. Why, sir, the spirit of Silas Browning will never rest in its grave until his daughter has her own."

"I was not aware that spirits are ever buried, but we will let that part pass. What, sir, do you expect to accomplish by dogging me in this fashion?"

"All I can hope for is to touch your manhood."

"Um! Do you know what I think of you?"

"That is not the question. Let us speak of Miriam Browning."

"Harper, you are an infernal rascal," said the judge, explosively. "As near as I can figure it, you stole this girl, sixteen years ago, because you expected to benefit from her disappearance. Now, you wish to hunt her up for the same motive. You are unpardonably selfish."

"What do you mean by saying that I stole her?" Harper angrily asked.

"Didn't you?"

"No, you infernal old rascal."

"Carefully, sir, carefully!" warned the judge, forgetting what he had said to Cleon, in just wrath at being thus insulted.

"Oh! careful your grandfather!" returned Thomas, irreverently. "If I had your head, I would sell it for a football."

"Sir!" cried Parmenter, with the same frown with which he had overawed mutineers in the old days of law and court room eloquence.

"Madam!" returned Harper, pushing his hat on one side.

The poor judge sat stupefied. He was a man who believed in dignity and its proper respect, and the audacity of a man who would insinuate that he was a woman was something simply awful.

If he had looked closer, he would have seen that Harper had been drinking heavily. It was an old habit of his, and, having decided that Cleon would soon be at the bottom of Silver Spur's upper crust, and Gus Hackett at the front as his specimen of an heiress, he had exulted a little too much liquidly; and in his folly he had visited Parmenter to exult over and worry him.

The last insult, however, was too much for the latter's endurance. He arose and made a sudden rush forward, and in a moment more the two men were locked in a frantic struggle.

Cleon, looking out of his closet with wild eyes, saw a confused mass of arms and legs, but loyal Hop Ching Willie came to his master's assistance, and Harper was forcibly ejected, after which he was glad to go home.

And a little later Parmenter bowed the negro out, telling him to call again the following day.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CANYON DAVE IN A CORNER.

ON the afternoon of that same day, David Canton rapped at the door of Persis Ripley's room. She opened promptly, and her face flushed with real pleasure as she recognized him.

"Is it possible?" she said, giving her hand. "I am very much pleased to see you, Mr. Canton. Please walk in and accept what hospitality my surroundings will afford."

"We don't expect a lay-out of black walnut or Brussels at Silver Spur," he calmly said, as he passed inside and took the chair she indicated. "My own quarters are humbly furnished, but the table and the two three-legged stools suit me just as well as Frisco style and surroundings."

He had laid aside his hat and his brown hair showed in careless little rings over his broad, white forehead. His face was a handsome one, and Persis thrilled with joy at seeing him at last her guest.

She might plan and execute great schemes with Miguel Perez, and smile on Judge Parmenter in hopes of winning a share of his great wealth; but for this young miner, who was at

once handsome, manly and intelligent, she felt a real affection, something new to her.

She had arrived at that period which occurs in the life of many a woman of the world, of sin—that point when she feels as though she would gladly leave the old existence and its waywardness behind her, and, with the man of her choice, try to tread a path free from crime and plotting.

Her heart beat rapidly, its pulsations quickened by hope, and she felt as though she was standing in a line where darkness and light met. Oh! that she could turn her back forever on the former and walk in that marvelous light.

The path of sin had at last grown bitter; she saw the thorns and thistles she had long disregarded.

Canyon Dave, however, had come on a practical and cruel, though really friendly errand, and he soon came to the point.

"I have called," he bluntly said, "to tell you that a storm is brewing in Silver Spur. There has been trouble here ever since Captain Nevada drove his picket-pin on Camel's Hump, and the first moral earthquake came last night. You remember who stood under the ban of Judge Lynch."

"Yes," said Persis, uneasily.

"Well, the miners have not been blind, though their eyesight has been mighty poor. Until last night, they did not suspect that Miguel Perez was one of Nevada's black sheep, but, now that they know it, they remember that you have been much in the company of Perez."

Persis changed color somewhat and a startled look crept over her face. Canyon Dave had not yet spoken plainly, but she was quick to surmise what was coming. More than once in the past had she been forced to leave camps and towns because she was Miguel's friend.

The ground trembled beneath her feet; she must save herself if she could.

"We were both lodgers here at the Alexis—that was all," she began; but he calmly interrupted.

"It may be so, but they suspect you knew him better than that; they believe you came here with him to work the town."

"I swear that it is not so!" she cried, clasping her hands.

"For your sake, I am glad to hear it, but I really fear it will be hard to convince the miners. Now, let me tell you just why I came to see you. There are dark mutterings among the men. They are full of fury toward Captain Nevada, and Perez will get the rope if he returns to the Spur. As I have said, they suspect you. They are not brutes, and you need fear no personal violence, but it would not be strange if you receive a note warning you not to tarry at this camp."

"Oh! merciful Heaven!" cried the woman, and her face worked convulsively, "why is this so? I tell you, sir, I have done no wrong. Miguel Perez was a stranger to me when I came to Silver Spur. Am I to blame for speaking to him in a friendly way? Did not these very men who are so hot to judge me, did not they trust him, too?"

The vehemence of her manner affected Canyon Dave unpleasantly. He saw that she wavered on the verge of tears, and he had all of a man's horror for a "scene."

"They was took in," he said, falling into wretched grammar in his confusion, "and we are all liable to be. I don't judge you—oh, Lord, no!—but I merely dropped in to tell you how the gale was blowing. If there is a blizzard, I shall hide in a hole, and never put my mouth to the bellows."

The mountaineer, in his masculine ignorance, believed he was acting a very generous part in thus proclaiming his stand, but Persis at once cried out, in the bitter sorrow of her heart:

"And will you lift no hand for a helpless woman? Will you not put out your strong arm to save an unfortunate creature in the hour of her persecution and misfortune? Will you stand aloof and see the tigers of Silver Spur rend me like wild beasts tear their prey?"

Canyon Dave partially started from his seat, dumb with amazement and most thoroughly uncomfortable.

Another moment and she flung herself at his feet and clasped his hand wildly.

"Oh, Dave, Dave! save me! save me!" she cried.

There was real agony and pleading in her voice, feelings which came straight from her heart, but under all was a determination to touch the heart of this man—to make him love her.

"Save you?" he echoed. "Why, Heaven bless you, you are in no danger!"

"Ah, you do not understand! Physical danger is not the only peril in this world. I am sensitive, Mr. Canton, and to be driven from this town would kill me. Think of the disgrace! To be driven away like a thief. Ah, just Heaven! there is no one to arise in this supreme hour, remembering the mother that smiled upon him when he was a child, and say, 'She is a woman. Let us use our strength to guard rather than to persecute her.'"

Canyon Dave stood confused and alarmed. Such emotion in a woman frightened him, and he felt ashamed, as though he had committed some crime and was the greatest villain unhung; but back of all was a distrust of Persis and a belief that she was really all that the miners suspected.

He was a man, and consequently wholly wrecked mentally by this scene; but he would not desert his common sense even in such a crisis.

"You do not answer. You look at me coldly. Oh, Dave, Dave! and I would die for you!"

With this passionate outburst she pressed his hand repeatedly to her lips, and he felt hot tears fall upon it.

The occurrence cleared his eyesight, and he saw clearly at last. He could not well do otherwise.

Persis Ripley, whatever might be in her heart, was confessing her love for him.

The discovery cleared his mind at once. He raised her to her feet, with hands as firm, yet gentle, as his will.

"Miss Ripley, I think we are making this affair too serious. As I have before said, no bodily harm will be offered you, and if you are warned to leave, it will be politely done. When the chosen parties appear, you can lay your case before them. As for me, I am but a humble member of the camp, almost a stranger. I will, however, go out now and see how matters stand. I will see you again soon."

He had commenced speaking with the intention of being very frank and blunt, but his courage failed him and he sought refuge in a compromise and delay.

Anything, so long as he escaped from her presence.

The concluding words of their interview he could never recall, but he remembered that Persis tearfully thanked him as she bade him adieu at the door.

Somewhat later, he found himself in a retired place, mopping the perspiration from his heated face.

"Well, darn my boots," he muttered, "if this hasn't been the worst day of my life! I wouldn't go through it again for a kingdom. And I won't! No, sir, you don't catch this chicken playing the guardian angel to a woman of Ripley's caliber again. I trust that I'm not heartless, but I'm no hog and I had just as soon wield the pick and leave such delicate matters to men less diffident."

He wandered on, thinking of the revelation of the interview, but had not gone a great distance when he encountered Gus Hackett.

Nothing, in his opinion, could have been more timely. Her fresh, innocent young face was a great improvement on that of Miss Ripley, and he did not hesitate to seek consolation for the affliction he had just endured.

Gus was in her usual mood; gay, brilliant, shrewd but innocent, and charming; and under the shelter of a cliff they sat down where the afternoon sun shed golden glory on the bleak rocks.

We now approach a critical period in their lives, a time far easier and far more pleasant to live than to relate. Some readers would like it described in full, but, strong in the belief that no living writer can do it justice, and that no writer has done it justice in the past, we dare not risk our pen on such a subject.

David Canton told the story of his love, earnestly and manfully, while the dark cliff spread out its broad breast protectingly and the golden sunshine lighted both young faces as though radiated from a smile beyond the region of clouds and storms.

Young Love is a strange but pleasant fellow. He turns night into day, tears into smiles, shadow into sunshine. He sits on the rich man's sofa and in the poor man's uncarpeted room. He is as erratic as he is companionable, and often appears when least expected. He is a creature of smiles, of joy, and of happiness, and, if well used, continues his friendship while life lasts.

CHAPTER XXX.

SPEEDY CLOUDS—WARNED TO LEAVE.

GUS HACKETT was not a coquette, and she did not attempt to play with the heart of her lover. He made his avowal manfully; her response was thoroughly womanly.

At the foot of the cliff their vows were said, and then time glided on unheeded by either, and twilight drew near.

Gus, however, had one matter on her mind which she wished solved. She had turned her back upon it and given her heart full play, but she did not forget.

She approached the subject boldly after a time.

"A certain person," said she, "has told me to ask you a certain question, at the same time looking you in the face."

"Excellent," said David, laughing. "Here we have a full-fledged mystery. Proceed!"

"The question is this: 'Did you come to Silver Spur to seek for a woman?'"

The mountaineer started and a new expression

crossed his face. 'Gus, watching closely, saw all this, but the look was not one of guilt; it had more of eagerness.

"What?" he cried, grasping her arm. "Who has asked you? What do you know of this matter?"

"Nothing whatever," she answered.

"But some one has told you—you have heard—'Gus, who bade you ask that question?"

The eagerness was still in his voice, but the girl felt no jealousy, and was sure all would be right at the end.

"A tall man I one evening met in the village. He was muffled in a cloak and hat, and I know no more about him."

"Incognito!" muttered Dave. "But, surely, 'Gus, he said more than that. Tell me all."

"You will not blame me?"

"Blame you? Why, 'Gus, how can I? No, I solemnly promise. But tell me all you can."

'Gus complied. She told of her encounter with Incognito, his warning—even to his words, so far as she could remember them.

The mountaineer listened and saw clearly at the end. Whatever Incognito knew of his past life, he was no friend. He had been erratic and tantalizing from the first; he had broken the promise made when the noose was around the neck of Miguel Perez; and now it appeared that he had tried to come between him and 'Gus.

Dave looked at the girl keenly.

"He has given you a warning; he has tried to make you believe that I came here as the lover of another woman. Do you believe him?"

He was standing before her; she arose and placed both her hands in his.

"Let what has passed between us to-night be my answer," she earnestly said. "I have promised to become your wife in the face of this warning—does that look like doubt?"

Canyon Dave was never more forcibly impressed than then, and in the hour he learned a lesson he would never forget.

A true woman loves and trusts through the crooked paths of doubt and the broad highways of man's misfortunes.

The mountaineer caught her to his heart, and for a few minutes there was a silence between them.

In the meantime, as they stood in the gathering shadows, two men came down the gulch. The first moved toward the lovers with a deliberate but cautious step, his gaze fixed keenly upon them; and in the tall form we recognize Incognito.

What he thought of the scene could not be told, for his *sombrero* seemed to droop lower over his face than usual, and his hands held his cloak to his chin.

Behind him came another man, who fitted from niche to niche of the cliff, plainly desirous of escaping discovery, but at the same time evidently dogging Incognito.

This person was Sawtooth Sam.

"'Gus," said Canyon Dave, anon, "I have made a pledge which forbids me revealing why I came to Silver Spur, but one thing I do swear, it was not as a lover. I came to seek a woman, it is true, but it is one I have not seen for many a long year—ay, not for sixteen years—"

"Ahem!"

The sound rolled out sonorously behind them, and both wheeled abruptly.

Incognito stood before them.

An utter silence of several seconds followed. The man of mystery muffled his face more than ever and they could barely see his two eyes blazing under the brim of his *sombrero*. On their own part, both were startled, and the mountaineer felt a strange mingling of feelings, chief among which were anger and hostility.

"Well," he said, at last, "what do you want here?"

"Merely to see the most interesting sight of my life," was the sneering response.

"The sight is one which does not concern you," said David, angrily. "Pass on!"

"Basily, young man."

"Fine words are not for spies."

"Do you call me a spy?"

"I do, sir."

"Beware!" said the unknown, warningly.

"Of you? Perhaps you jest, but I tell you I have no fear nor love for you. You have proved your falsity and treachery. Only last night you swore to at once reveal the secret I would know. I performed the work you marked out for me, but you had run away like a—"

"Speak plainly, young man."

"Never mind," said Dave, coldly. "Suffice it to say, I resent this intrusion."

"Is it possible?" sneered the malevolent stranger, shrugging his shoulders. "Is it possible that the hawk is inclined to 'resent' the chance that threatens to rob him of his prey? Young woman, I have gently warned you before; now I will speak plainer. You shall know this man as he is."

Incognito spoke with somber energy which was not counteracted in the least by the frowning rocks and the gloomy twilight hour. 'Gus shuddered and clung closer to Dave's arm; her faith was still unshaken.

And a few feet back of Incognito, Sawtooth Sam crouched behind a bowlder, a revolver in his hand, and listened and watched. None of

the others had discovered him, but he was there to play whatever part fate might allot him.

"Speak on," said Canyon Dave, smiling coldly.

"Well, I will, for I know you well. Your name is not David Canton, but Oliver Peters. You have served time for the States of Kentucky, Arkansas, Louisiana and California. You have been a gambler, horse-thief, confidence man and assassin. You have a legal wife in Kentucky and several, less legal, in other States. Such, Miss Hackett, is the man you now so fondly cling to and admire."

During this long accusation, the mountaineer had gone from one degree of wrath to another, and at the end he could no longer restrain his indignation.

"Liar and scoundrel!" he shouted, "you have gone too far. By my life, I will cram the falsehoods down your throat. Your malignity has followed me long enough, and now I will cast the future to the winds and pay you blow for blow."

With these words the angry mountaineer took a step forward, but Incognito's hand at once arose, holding a gleaming revolver.

"Stop!" he coldly said. "One step more and I will fire. I am master here!"

"I reckon that there is a piece o' ther pie on my plate, an' hyer's ther dinner-checks. Throw up yer hands, yer black critter, an' let thar be a squar' deal!"

The voice came from the base of the cliff and, looking thence, the trio saw Sawtooth Sam. He had partially arisen and was lying over the bowlder, his elbows resting on the rock and each hand holding a revolver, the muzzles of which were turned upon Incognito.

They stared at him in silence for a moment, and then he spoke again.

"I reckon, mister, that you don't hear. Your shootin' iron keeps its level an' might go off. You will observe that I hold ther wheel an' kin run ther skiff aground ef I thinks best. Up with your hands!"

The unknown sullenly obeyed, and then Sawtooth Sam emerged from his ambush.

"Mebbe I ain't welcome ter ther ball o' ther feast," he placidly said, "but I never see ther sixes a-flashin' 'thout wantin' ter take a lift ov ther lever. Shall I go or stay, Canyon Dave?"

"Stay, by all means," said the mountaineer. "I am glad you came, and I could say the same had the situation been reversed when you chipped in. I let my temper run away with me, for which I am truly sorry."

"I thought my revolver would cool your blood," sneered the unknown.

"Silence on ther right," said Sam. "Don't you put in your idee until ther court sees good an' ready ter hear it. I'm a man o' peace'ble inclinations, an' I'm a-goin' ter have halcyon calm hyer ef I gouge an' slay ter secure it. You hear me?"

"We all desire peace," said Canyon Dave, hastily, "and as such elements as we have here can never mix, perhaps we may as well adjourn."

"One word first," said Incognito, with surprising calmness. "I wish to know if this young woman intends to disregard what I have told her."

"I do," said 'Gus, firmly. "You may be speaking maliciously, or under a false impression; but, in any case, I shall not believe without proof as clear as day."

"Wayward girl!" exclaimed the unknown, with impatience. "Can nothing arrest your course?"

"When she's right, nothin' kin, an' hvar's ther hand that backs her," said Sawtooth Sam, tapping his revolvers.

"Are you, too, leagued against her?"

"I'm leagued on ther side o' right an' reason, an' I wish I was as sure o' you. I mistrust a man that goes gallopin' around with his face muffled up like a villyun in a play. Why do yer do it?"

"A very pertinent question," said Canyon Dave, with energy. "You will oblige us, sir, by showing your face. Remove your hat and cloak."

For the first time, the unknown showed signs of uneasiness. He glanced about, as though seeking for a way of escape, and, for once, probably considered himself in a corner.

"Canyon Dave," he suddenly said, "beware what you do. I hold a secret you want to know, and I swear that one act of hostility toward me will forever seal my lips. Think of this before you strike!"

The mountaineer stood perplexed and uncertain. He would have given much at that moment to have known his proper course of procedure, but his wisdom was only human. He felt that the unknown would keep his word, but would it be any different if he held his hand?

"That don't count me in," said Sawtooth Sam, "an' I'm goin' fur ther grand prize. Ef you've got sand I'll fight ye, but unmask you most!"

He had taken a step forward when Incognito's hand came up with marvelous quickness; there was a flash and report, and Sam fell to

the ground; while in a second more the unknown was speeding away up the gulch.

Canyon Dave started in pursuit, but Sam was on his feet in a moment, and then as he tore away after the fugitive, the mountaineer turned back to 'Gus. The other men soon disappeared, and after vainly waiting half an hour for Sam's return, the young people went back to the village.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TOM TRUEAXE RECEIVES A LETTER—AND PERHAPS ACTS BOLDLY.

CANYON DAVE left 'Gus without any cloud on his mind so far as she was concerned, for she had announced her confidence in him in a manner which left no doubt of her sincerity. She had said that she would believe in him despite a score of accusers who dared not show their faces, and between them was perfect peace.

Once by himself, however, the mountaineer had time to think more coolly and a dull pain fell on his heart as he thought of the quarrel between Incognito and himself.

"I have cast away my last hope," he muttered, gloomily, "but I am not so sure that I ever had a reason to hope for anything from Incognito. He summoned me from the pleasures of grizzly killing, and when I arrived here, refused to divulge anything. Why? There is a mystery somewhere. Am I playing the cat's-paw for any one? I can't see in what way, and yet it is plain that there is a plot in the air. Let me study on the matter and see where it lies."

He reached the Alexis and entered the saloon, and, an hour later, Sawtooth Sam came in quietly.

He shook his head on catching Dave's glance, and then came over and sat down beside him.

"No use," he gloomily said. "Ther 'farnal critter run like a streak o' devastatin' lightning', an' afore I made ther first quarter, bolted ther track an' hid in some hole. Durn ther luck!"

"Are you wounded?"

"Me? No."

"But you fell when he fired."

"Sartin. 'Twasn't policy ter stan' up an' be perforated. He was amazin' quick an' had no time ter draw, but I tripped myself up on ther jump an' ther lead went wild. Kenyon Dave, who is that critter?"

"I really don't know."

"But you know somethin' about him."

"Merely that he holds a secret I would like to learn. He has proved this much, but where he gained his information, or who he is, I can't tell you."

Sam drummed on the table and looked thoughtful, but just then Tom Trueaxe, late of Coyote Cliff, entered the saloon and called for some whisky.

"There is another man I suspect," said Dave. "I have no reason, but I believe he is in Silver Spur for no good."

"His frontispiece is ag'in' him," Sam carelessly acknowledged.

Trueaxe drank his whisky and went his way to the cabin he had bought since coming to Silver Spur. He soon had a light going, and, sitting down on a stool, proceeded to fill and start his pipe.

The fragrant smoke had just begun curling upward when Tom saw a sheet of white paper lying on the table. He picked it up and then grew surprised and interested as he read what was written upon it.

This is what he saw:

"TOM TRUEAXE:—You have made a mistake in coming to Silver Spur, for men of your versatility can do better elsewhere. You have agreed to murder Cleon, the colored man, but you are advised not to attempt it. We give you just twenty-four hours to get out of town. Depart or die!"

"THE VIGILANTES."

The man from Coyote Cliff remained staring at the missive until his pipe went out. Its eccentric wabbling between his teeth recalled his wandering wits.

"Judas 'Ristocrat!" he muttered. "I reckon I've got it now. Infamy don't pay. I lived a moral life fur sixteen year an' grew fat on Tom Harper's prodigal calf, but ther minute I begin ter paddle my own canoe, luck goes dead back on me. 'Depart or die. Ther Vigilantes.' I can't see rhyme about them words, but they hum in my ears like a jigger-saw. Durn their ole epistle!"

He looked at the letter as though to reproach it for being a party to such an outrage on a pilgrim from Coyote Cliff, but, anon, brightened and picked up his pipe.

"I've got twenty-four hours o' grace, an' I may as wal live in luxury an' clover while I hang on ter ther ragged edge. Mebbe, somebody'll flip over ther kards an' necessitate a new deal afore then."

He smoked steadily for half an hour and then came to a conclusion. He put on his hat, arose and wen over to the Alexis to see Thomas Harper. The chances of success were not numerous for the San Francisco man was not a bird of the night as a usual thing, and Trueaxe would not dare to let himself be seen with him; but, as luck would have it, they met outside the hotel.

Going to one side, they were soon engaged in conversation, and Trueaxe told all that had happened.

"Now, what's my best bolt?" he asked.

Harper, however, was more alarmed than his man.

"Good heavens!" he said, "I'm afraid the fat is in fire, so to speak. Clearly some one overheard us when I hired you to kill the nigger. How much did we say then, anyhow?"

Both men threw their minds backward to the meeting in question.

"You hired me to kill the ducky," was the wonderful discovery of Mr. Trueaxe.

"Yes, and curse the luck! you asked me how I was getting along, and I told you I did not know which of old Parmenter's putative daughters was the female I wished to find."

"So you did, squar', so yer did. I remember it now."

"Then, whoever overheard our conversation is liable to make trouble for either of us. So the letter was signed 'The Vigilantes.' I do not believe there is such an organization in Silver Spur. If so, it is of new birth. More likely, some private individual has an ax to grind, and took this way to make his argument more binding."

"Wal, I reckon I'll slope, anyhow," said Trueaxe, somewhat nervously. "The air o' Silver Spur don't seem so s'lubrious as I s'pected it would, an' I think I'll start fur the Hot Springs of Arkansas."

"Do as you think best," said Harper, absently.

"Then we part hyer, an' forever. Thar is a tender spot in my heart when I think o' yer kindness in ther past, for I remember that yer ministered ter my declining years fur sixteen summers. You couldn't 'a' done better ef I was Huldah, an' I p'ciate it all. Hyar's my fist."

They shook hands and Harper saw him go, hoping he would break his neck before morning; but once beyond the cabin, Tom turned his face toward Camel's Hump.

"Up thar, whar the eagle builds his nest in ther dizzy air an' Cap'n Nevada whets his bowie-knife on honest men's skulls—thar is my promised land. Inhospitable Silver Spur, so long!"

He shook his fist tragically at the camp, and strode on rapidly.

At about the same time, Mr. James Carter was entering the room of Persis Ripley.

The gambler had been in a gloomy mood all day, for the sudden taking off of his partner in ways that are dark had affected him considerably, but he had readily obeyed Miss Ripley's summons.

Their interview lasted for an hour; and when Carter had retired, Persis spent another hour in pacing her room.

"A few days will make or break me," she muttered, dully. "Miguel and Carter will kill Gus Hackett, and then I will go to Judge Parmenter with the forged letters, and say: 'Poor Miss Hackett is dead, and all the people are wondering who assassinated her. It was my fortune to find certain papers belonging to her—letters written by you, and which acknowledge that you had been her lover, and contain threats of violence unless she withdraw all claim to you. Can it be, judge, that you know who killed poor 'Gus?'"

She had gone through the proposed speech with dramatic nicety, pausing before a small looking-glass to note the expression of her features.

"Thus I will accomplish a double object," she said, continuing, "This odious Hackett will be out of the way, giving me one small, weak chance of winning Canyon Dave; while by my forged papers I'll have five thousand dollars out of Parmenter. Excellent! The stream is flowing!"

Truly, she had worked out a most diabolical plan. It was the same she had once before laid before Carter, when Ball was alive, but had Canyon Dave smiled on the female plotter that day, her great crime would have been abandoned.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A ROOM FOR HARPER.

It sometimes happens that villains overreach themselves, and Thomas Harper, in his anxiety to get some young woman to assume the role of the Browning heiress, and permit him to finger the Browning wealth, had recklessly laid himself liable to future trouble.

The day following the events last related 'Gus Hackett walked into the private room of Judge Parmenter.

"I want your advice on one point, sir," she said.

"A retaining fee of twenty-five dollars will secure my distinguished and earnest co-operation, Miss Hackett," he playfully said.

"Is that all? Why, I expected that a member of the Silver Spur bar would charge at least fifty."

"Captain Nevada has knocked prices way off their uprights," he said, lugubriously, remembering how the road-agent was really injuring his business.

"Well, to be serious, I had a singular encoun-

ter the other day, and I want you to advise me. A certain man of this place met me in the street and offered me a fortune of a hundred thousand dollars."

"Did you take it?" he asked, smiling.

"I asked for time to consider the matter."

"You were foolish. Never procrastinate in such matters. Large fortunes are seldom offered so freely."

"The price of the wealth was deception and fraud on my part."

"In that case you did well to refuse it," Parmenter heartily said.

"A man came to me on the street," continued 'Gus, "and told me that somewhere in the country a fortune was waiting for an owner, in the person of a young lady. It was not at all particular who she was, so long as she was of the brunette type. The real heiress disappeared when a baby, and has never been found. Now, this kind-hearted gentleman offered me the chance to step in and claim the identity and fortune of the missing heiress, provided I would sign a paper agreeing to give him ten thousand dollars for his share of the wages of fraud."

'Gus had expected Parmenter to be interested, but she was scarcely prepared for the degree of earnestness he showed. He sat bolt upright and stared at her in a strange way.

"Who is this man?" he abruptly demanded.

"His name is Thomas Harper."

The judge sat like one dumfounded. He had from the first believed Harper to be the villain, but he was astonished at his persistent and open audacity.

"Is this a fact?" he slowly asked, after a pause.

"All true, judge."

"Then, by Jupiter! he has overreached himself!"

"What do you mean, sir?"

Parmenter arose, paced the room for several minutes in silence, and then came to the side of 'Gus and sat down.

"Edna has, of course, told you of the remarkable letters received by her and myself, purporting to be from Otis Sprague, and asserting that she is not my daughter?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, that charge is all a fabrication; an emanation from a malevolent mind. Edna, I need scarcely say, is my daughter, and so, for that matter, are Helen and Millicent my daughters. There is, however, more to this matter than appears on the surface, and I will tell it to you in confidence. You are not to say a word to any one, not even Edna."

'Gus promised, and then the judge gave a veracious account of the visit of Thomas Harper, and his claim that one of the young ladies bearing the name of Parmenter, was really another person, and the heiress of a large fortune.

"Harper is playing a deep game," said Parmenter, in conclusion, "though what it is I cannot yet clearly see. It may be there is a missing heiress in the case, but more likely there is a trick in the case not yet visible on the surface."

"But why did he lay claim to one of your daughters so openly?"

The judge showed some confusion, but soon rallied.

"Oh! I suppose he wanted a brunette, and thought one of them would about fill the role."

"But," continued 'Gus, with a logic which again confused the judge, "if he merely desired a girl of brunette complexion, why did he not select some child of poverty rather than one of wealth, like your daughter?"

"He probably thought me as mercenary as himself, and believed I would sell one of my children for the paltry hundred thousand," Parmenter managed to answer.

'Gus looked at him keenly.

"Judge," she said, "you are not dealing with me fairly. You know more of this matter than you say. Shall I speak plainly?"

"Yes, yes; go on."

"Then, let me say that I sincerely believe one of your nominal daughters is this missing heiress!"

Parmenter looked really startled, but he rallied again after a little time, and laughed at the idea quite naturally, but he avoided Miss Hackett's keen eyes. He had not looked for such penetration.

Having given her opinion she allowed him to have his say, but when he finished returned to the old subject.

"What am I to say to Harper? What am I to do?"

He looked at her almost angrily.

"Do?" he repeated. "Would you rob that wronged girl of her own?"

'Gus drew herself up proudly.

"You mistake, Judge Parmenter," she icily said, and her eyes told how deeply his insinuation had gone. "I am not a thief, and I would rob no one. I trust, sir, that though poor, I shall never forget that I am Brad Hackett's daughter. No; I have no desire to handle the wealth of the heiress, but when Harper spoke to me, it flashed upon me that I might beat him at his own game. This idea I now abandon, since even you think I am—"

Parmenter sprung forward, put out his hands and stopped her. He was filled with sorrow and remorse, and the apology he made established good feeling between them.

"I, too, have an idea," he said, anon. "Harper told a straight story at first, but has since so crossed himself that I am all at sea. I do not know whether the fortune of which he talks is in California, Maine, or some intermediate locality. Now, why can you not pretend to fall in with his views and accompany him to his home? To insure your own safety, Brad Hackett, Mr. Canton and myself would follow closely, and thus we would be able to track him to his lair and expose his guilty scheme."

"That is my idea, exactly."

"But, if he knows you are stopping here, he will be shy."

"He does not know it. I have been here but little except at night, you know."

A decision having been thus made, Brad Hackett and Canyon Dave were called into the conference. Both objected a good deal at first, but as they were to follow so closely, it seemed as though harm to 'Gus could be prevented, if Harper had evil intentions. One other point was seized by the active mind of Canyon Dave, as will be seen further on.

As a result of this conference, Harper that night received a letter, through the hands of Cleon, who had been encountered on the street by 'Gus.

Harper read the note—it was very brief—in the privacy of his room, and it filled him with delight. It said that the writer had nearly decided to accept his offer, but desired him to meet her at a designated point that night that they might discuss the matter further.

The plotter was filled with triumph, and inwardly decided that another night would probably see him and his counterfeit heiress on the road to San Francisco.

"There is but one stumbling-block," he thought, staring hard at the wall. "What shall be done with Cleon?"

Just then he heard a brawl outside the window. He hastened to look for the cause, and saw Sawtooth Sam engaged in a wordy war with a stranger. The quarrel ended in smoke, but it had given an idea to Harper. He went down-stairs, found Sawtooth Sam, seated him at a table and began to furnish him with liquor and to encourage him to talk.

As the fiery stuff went down, Sam grew talkative and communicative, and, as Harper led him on, told of fiendish crimes among the mines, on the road, and between decks.

He talked to greedy ears, and Harper was not long in going further. He spoke of Cleon and asked if Sawtooth Sam would remove him, and the fellow at once agreed.

"Ter-night," he said, with a hideous grin, "ther nigger goes ter sleep ter wake up t'other side o' ther divide."

Even Harper shivered at the want of feeling in his voice, but it made his black heart leap for joy. Sawtooth Sam was bold and brave, as he had amply shown in the fight with Captain Nevada in the pass: he would be worth a dozen like Tom Trueaxe.

"I have another piece of work for you," continued Harper. "Twenty-four hours hence I wish to leave Silver Spur, secretly, accompanied by a young lady. She will go willingly, but our road will be through dangers. I would like you and another man, if you know of a trustworthy fellow without a conscience, to act as our guard, and to cut and shoot whoever I say."

"Wal, ole pard, I should smile ef you ain't struck ther pay-dirt now. I'm yer man, to-day, some other day, all ther time, es long es you pays ther money. Ef you want a bank robbed, call on Sawtooth Sam. Ef you want a claim jumped or a throat cut, call on ther same pilgrim. An' as fur a pard, I reckon Ben Tubbs will sneeze when I take snuff!"

Harper was delighted, and gave Sam a good sized retainer, directed him to bring Ben Tubbs around the following day, and then the companions in projected crime parted with mutual good wishes.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

PERSIS RIPLEY'S TRAP, AND WHAT IT CAUGHT.

SAWTOOTH SAM stepped outside the saloon, after parting from Harper, and stood breathing the fresh air. He had imbibed more whisky than was good for him and knew it well, but he had a hard head and knew how to banish the effects of his indiscretion.

He had not been long at his post when a sudden gleam came into his eyes. He had seen a man crossing the street whom he at once recognized.

"Durned ef 'tain't ther nigger," he muttered. "Wal, now, this 'ere is what I call a stream o' ther heaviest luck. I'll hitch onter him ter onc't an' beguile him off among ther hills, an' then we'll see ef he ever comes back. I say Cleon, hole on, thar."

He went out to meet the unsuspecting negro, giving no outward signs of his conflict with the saloon liquor, and the two were soon engaged in conversation.

A little later, they went off toward the south

of the town together, and when Sawtooth Sam returned he came alone.

The evening saw another important interview, for Gus Hackett met Harper according to agreement, and near at hand, listening to every word, were Canyon Dave and Judge Parmenter.

Harper was led on to say all he would, and he told all except the place where the fortune in question was awaiting a claimant, and the family name. In all other particulars he was frank, though, of course, he did not confess that he had stolen the lost heiress.

Gus seemed to talk wholly from a worldly point of view, and when Harper solemnly declared that the fortune was as he said, promptly declared that she would agree to his proposal. He was to receive ten thousand dollars at the start and continue as her guardian for two years.

Arrangements were made for flight on the following night, and Harper carelessly mentioned that he had made preparations for a possible pursuit by engaging two men who were to act as guards and guides.

Harper went home in high spirits.

"I shall succeed in getting out of Silver Spur nice and easy," he thought, "and once in San Francisco, the fun begins. If I don't succeed in getting away with four-fifths of the Browning wealth within two years you may call me a liar."

And the schemer's hopes went up another degree when, on the following day, Sawtooth Sam came to tell him that Cleon had crossed the divide. Later in the day some miners came upon several birds of prey picking the bones of a human being, but poor Cleon had been but a negro, and no one took the trouble to investigate when he came no more to Silver Spur.

Ben Tubbs presented himself before his new patron, and when he had said that he knew every foot of the mountain trail, Harper decided that he had secured a pair of valuable allies who were as unscrupulous as they were competent.

Half an hour before dark of that afternoon three persons met in the wood which has before been mentioned as lying north of the town, at the foot of the Camel's Hump.

The last of the three to arrive was a woman, and then Persis Ripley, Miguel Perez and James Carter stood together in the cover of the bushes.

Several days before Persis had hired Carter and Ball to commit a crime, but by a chance all regretted, the latter had lost his life at the hands of Perez, which had made a new partner necessary. Carter had at first been very bitter against the Mexican, but sober thought convinced him that Perez had only acted naturally, and he had consented to become his ally in this new work.

Persis nodded to her followers as she came up.

"The girl is up in the cabin," she calmly said, "but twilight is near at hand, and we had better get in position. Follow me."

She led the way to where a faint path intersected the timber.

"Along this way she will soon come," said Persis, in a business-like tone. "It is the road she invariably travels. You will hide one on each side of the path, and when she appears, leap up and seize her. You know what else to do."

"That is Carter's work," said Miguel, shrugging his shoulders. "I'm a devil in my way, but I don't care to speed the blow that kills Gus Hackett. She is pretty and innocent, and her only crime is in loving Dave Canton."

"Carefully," warned Persis. "You and I should not preach such a doctrine. Who put poison in liquor meant for Otis Sprague?"

"I," the Mexican boldly said. "What of it? He is nothing but a low miner. I'll drop him yet. But, since you have touched the subject, who fired the shot that shivered the bottle containing that liquor? Ah! you waver. I know you better than you think. You came between me and my revenge then."

"Why did I do it?" Persis demanded. "Not to save Sprague, nor to baffle you—"

"No, it was for Canyon Dave. I know that episode in your life pretty well. I know, too, that you one evening dressed yourself in boy's clothing and led him to a cabin to have an interview with—yourself. A very pretty little scheme, yet I believe he knew you from the first."

"For Heaven's sake, cease your bickering," said Carter. "Let's settle down. The Hackett may come at any moment."

"Is your arm steady, Jim Carter?" Persis asked.

"Like a rock."

"Then do your duty well. Let there be no cry. Strike home, and then I will appear. I want to touch these forged papers I carry with the girl's blood and then go to the proud judge and say, 'Silence is golden. Purchase these papers and you are safe; refuse, and I will proclaim you the assassin of Gus Hackett.' Oh! then you will see the Parmenter money-bags open!"

Persis spoke without a trace of feeling, but Miguel Perez turned away with a shudder. An

icy chill was upon him; a feeling such as he had never before experienced. It seemed to weigh down his heart. The wood and the sky were strangely gloomy, and the gathering twilight made him nervous. He would gladly have been back in the lair of Captain Nevada.

Minutes passed on, but Gus did not appear. Twilight had given place to darkness, and the assassins grew impatient.

Persis arose.

"I will go and look for her," she said.

She went away toward Brad Hackett's cabin, and the men arose and stretched their weary limbs. Anon they again sought cover, this time unconsciously nearer the northern side of the wood.

By and by, Miguel Perez heard some one coming along the path. His hearing had been preternaturally keen; he had heard even the falling of the ripening leaves. Now, he heard footfalls and spoke to Carter.

"It's the female Hackett!" said the gambler. "Stand ready now, make sure of your grip and I will soon do the rest. Be still!"

They waited. Nearer came the doomed girl. Miguel Perez was terribly excited. A cold sweat was on his forehead, and his heart beat like a muffled drum. He was like a man just plunging into crime, and yet he and sin had shaken hands many a time before.

Their victim came quickly along the path, and then they sprung up together and seized her. Each man caught an arm, while Perez pressed his broad hand over her mouth. She bounded like a frightened deer, but no cry could escape her, and her puny strength was nothing compared with theirs.

Carter's hand went up, holding his knife; it descended, and the weapon went hilt-home in her breast.

One more struggle she made and then lay a limp, lifeless burden in their arms.

They laid her down, awed into stillness by the awful majesty of death. Miguel felt weak about the knees and knelt by her side. Then from his lips arose a hoarse cry.

He had looked, not on the face of Gus Hackett, but on that of Persis Ripley! The woman who lay dead at his feet had been she who had been his ally for many a long year.

Dully through his clouded mind crept the realization that their change of position had wrought all this evil, and that Persis had thus walked into the trap she set for another; but in a moment more the frenzy of madness coursed through his veins, and all his fury turned against the man who had dealt the fatal blow.

He sprung upon Carter, who had stood like one paralyzed when he knew what he had done, and, bearing him to the earth, plunged his knife again and again into his heart.

Let us draw the curtain around the scene, for it was too awful to be described at length.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE RIDERS OF THE NIGHT.

THERE was a very good reason why Gus Hackett did not tread her usual path and so meet the fate laid out for her in the timber; she had gone to keep her appointment with Thomas Harper.

That individual had made all necessary preparations for departure from Silver Spur, and at dusk was waiting at the western limit of the village. Sawtooth Sam and Ben Tubbs were with him, each man had a horse, and close at hand stood a fourth.

Harper had begun to grow uneasy when Gus appeared, all prepared for the journey.

He greeted her cordially, and then the quartette mounted and rode away on the western trail. They had a rough and wild road to travel for several miles, as the trail wound around among the passes of the mountain, but Tubbs was an old resident and expressed ample confidence.

Their departure had been observed by another party, and as soon as they were fairly out of sight, Canyon Dave, Brad Hackett and Parmenter rode slowly after them.

The gentleman from San Francisco might yet find that he had started on a crooked and perplexing trail.

He saw only success in the future, however, as he rode by the side of Gus, with Tubbs and Sawtooth Sam in advance, and no one had yet mentioned that along their route Captain Nevada often appeared with his knights of the road.

As they entered the gloomy pass, Harper was somewhat affected by the darkness and the frowning rocks, and asked Sawtooth Sam to fall back to his side.

"What do you think of the prospect?" he asked.

"Wa-al, that er a question not easily answered. There are times when a man can't tell what he does think, because ev'rything is so mighty onartin," was the deliberate reply.

"Do you apprehend danger?"

"Danger is 'most allays 'round. It takes ter our heels when we git our first fall from ther cradle, an' it follers us ter ther grave. Whether thar is danger beyond thar, you must ax the preachers. They kin give you an answer quicker'n a mule kin kick. But, ter be explicit,

thar ain't no particular danger ef we don't run afoul o' Cap'n Nevada."

"But we may be jussed."

"Let 'em pussue," retorted Sam. "I reckon we kin shake off at our heels all ther trouble we pick up."

His confidence served to give Harper fresh courage, and he directed his conversation to Gus. On her part, she maintained a calmness which won his admiration.

"Once let me get her in San Francisco and she has the wit and assurance to carry her triumphantly through the ordeal. I defy my fellow trustees to break down either my chain of evidence or my heiress."

His thoughts were rudely disturbed. They were in a part of the pass where the two walls were but a few yards apart and each arose abruptly for a hundred feet—a narrow, dark and gloomy place.

Suddenly, from the darkness, sounded a keen, commanding voice.

"Halt! Hands up and stand where you are. If you move, lead will fly!"

The guides promptly obeyed the first command, and Harper and Gus necessarily paused at their heels, though Harper was far from being reconciled to the idea. He was ready for a dash, with liberty staked against life.

But out from the niches of the pass, rode several men who ranged themselves in front of the quartette, and the time for escape seemed to have passed.

"What is all this exodus about?" demanded one of the new-comers.

"We are on our way to jine Cap'n Nevada," replied Sawtooth Sam, coolly.

"The devil you are! Why?"

"Wa-al, we are ambitious. We wanter be men in ther busy world instead o' clods. We wanter be noted, we pant fur fame, an' hunger fur riches."

"Bah! Do you know who I am?"

"No," said Sam.

"I am Captain Nevada!"

The miner uttered a subdued whistle. He had recognized the outlaw's voice at the very first, but he had not cared to confess it. What would come of the meeting he did not know, but he sincerely hoped he would not be recognized in turn. Nevada had no reason to love him. They had met twice before; once in that same pass, when Sam saved the stage from Nevada's hands, and again in the Alexis saloon when he called the road-agent a liar, and tore his beard from his face.

Plainly, there was no hope that they could tie to each other.

"Don't you believe it?" asked Nevada, interpreting the whistle as an expression of incredulity.

"Don't see no reason ter doubt ye, mister, but I didn't s'pect ter find ye so soon. How's ther folks?"

"Never mind. First, tell me who you are, and also, give the pedigree of your train."

"Wal, my name is Sile Bragg, an' yer is an ole man an' his darter who has be'n to ther Spur ter look at a salted mine. Hel hel they found it wouldn't pan out five cents ter ther ton, an' they're goin' back disgusted."

"I'll look at them."

It was a decision which did not please the quartette. Gus had recognized the outlaw as Sam had done, and he was the only person she really feared on earth; while Harper had no sooner heard the name announced than he saw a formidable rival for the possession of his heiress.

Sam and Tubbs, however, were not so docile as they appeared. Neither came of thin blood, and during the conversation before recorded, they had carried on a system of telegraphy among themselves which was very well understood.

It meant fight.

Before them were half a dozen men. There might be more in advance, but no others were visible. To surrender to this handful of outlaws would, in the opinion of the guides, be a disgrace. They must cut their way through.

"Come right on, cap'n," said Sawtooth Sam. "Ther show is free from ther ground up."

Nevada, however, had no intention of committing an indiscretion. He knew small parties were often worse to handle than large ones, and he turned to his men to give directions which the guides saw would result to their injury.

They must fight at once or never.

Sam turned to Tubbs and nodded, and then their hands came down holding each a revolver. When they put them up so obediently, as directed by the road-agent, the revolvers had gone along with the crowd.

Then the excitement began. The two fired together, and once the fusillade was begun, they kept it up briskly. Thomas Harper joined in, and the dull cracks and spiteful hiss of lead approached machine-like regularity.

Still, it was not a long skirmish. Captain Nevada had gone down at the first fire, and Ben Tubbs could almost have sworn he had put a bullet through his heart; while the remainder of the robbers were scattered with scarcely a return shot.

"Spur and hoof!" shouted Sawtooth Sam, in high exultation, and then the quartette swept along the pass at full speed.

Harper relieved his mind by expressing a degree of exultation, but the guides said nothing. They had an unpleasant suspicion that the way before them was not so clear as they could wish.

If Nevada had really been out to ply his trade, there was a chance that other men might be near.

The accuracy of their reasoning was soon shown. They reached a place where a gulch joined the main pass, and where former rains had left a deposit of earth on the hard ground.

They struck this spot, and the sand muffled the sound of their horses' feet—a most fortunate fact; for, from in advance came a well-known noise which even Thomas Harper knew to be the pounding of hoofs on flinty soil.

Ben Tubbs pulled in his horse abruptly, and the others were not slow to follow suit.

"Well?" questioned Harper, trying to be as matter-of-fact as his guides.

"It's j-ust as I expected," said Tubbs, "Thar's men comin' this way, an' hyer's bettin' ten ter one they are Cap'n Nevada's gang."

"What shall we do?"

The miner pointed to the smaller gulch.

"In thar an' let them go past."

It was the only thing they could do and seemed a very good plan. They rode in as Tubbs had suggested, and in the darkness were safe from casual observation. They paused near the foot of the right hand cliff, where their horses had sand under their feet and would betray nothing by stamping.

The strangers came nearer, riding at a rapid pace, and were soon abreast the gulch. Sawtooth Sam chuckled, feeling sure they would go on, but the quartette was not to so easily escape from their danger.

Opposite the mouth of the gulch the riders suddenly paused, and then a voice hailed them from the eastern trail.

"Hallo!—pull up, there! Have you met any one on the trail?"

Surprise and consternation fell upon the fugitives; it was the voice of Captain Nevada.

"Not a meet," was the answer.

"Then, by Jupiter, we have work to do. There has been shooting back here, and Sykes and Hazen have got their last pills. I should have fared as badly but for my breast-plate. The gang got clear and rode this way on the jump; and, since you did not meet them anywhere, it follows that they must have concealed themselves somewhere. This gulch looks suspicious. Here, Benito, slide off your horse, strike a light, and see if you can find footprints in the sand."

CHAPTER XXXV.

IN A TRAP.

CAPTAIN NEVADA'S words were of especial interest to the quartette in the gulch, for even Harper and Gus knew that an examination of the ground would serve to bring the road-agents straight to where they stood.

"I reckon we had better go," said Sawtooth Sam, coolly. "Ther air seems ter be a leetle sultry 'round hyer."

"Lead on, for Heaven's sake!" said Harper. "It is ruin to remain here. Nevada leads those dogs, and has a score of men at his back."

Without any further words Ben Tubbs placed himself at the front, and the fugitives moved on up the gulch.

For some distance they had the friendly sand to deaden their movements, and in a short time they had left the outlaws behind.

Tubbs, however, was not in a very satisfied frame of mind. They had entered a place from which he did not believe escape would be easy. He had passed through the gulch when hunting, but never on horseback before.

He communed with his fears to his companions.

"Ef we go on, we shall kim out outer ther side o' ther mountain whar chasms an' precipices are thicker'n fleas, an' no hoss kin tread thar 'thout breakin' his neck. That's squar'. Now, what be we goin' ter do?"

"Turn an' fight our way through," suggested Sam.

"Better hide and let them pass, provided they have followed this far," said Harper.

"Hole on, fudge. You kin bet your pile on two things. First, they ain't gi'n up the chase. Second, they ain't goin' ter make any one-hoss s'arch. It's dark, I allow, but Cap'n Nevada is a keener."

"Ben is right," said Sawtooth Sam, an' yit I reckon your idee is about ther correct one, squar'. We might git hurt in a fight. What's this kenyon up hyar, Ben?"

"Never was up thar," said Tubbs, dubiously.

"Listen!" suddenly interrupted Gus. "I hear the sound of hoof-strokes down the gulch."

"Right you are!" added Sam. "We must go somewhar right away. Inter this kenyon an' trust ter luck."

It was a small gulch, which joined the one they had been following, and they rode into the darkness with a hope that it would prove a place of refuge.

Ben Tubbs, however, seemed doubtful and uneasy, and he lagged behind until Sam re-

quested his presence at the front. In truth, the man was very much afraid they were venturing into a trap, and desired to avoid the responsibility of leading the way.

Once at the front, however, he showed resolution and earnestness, and a niche was soon found in one wall where they could remain secreted until the result was seen.

Harper looked at Gus. She had been very silent since their trouble began, and he feared she was breaking down.

"I am sorry to have brought you into trouble," he said, more gently than usual.

"Oh! I can stand the pressure," she coolly returned. "I've seen Captain Nevada before. He is only a man, and, if he can be outwitted, I shall enjoy this affair very much."

"By Jupiter! you are a treasure, my girl," he admiringly said.

"Oh! no; I am after the treasure," was her very appropriate reply.

He laughed, but just then their joy turned to sorrow as the old sounds of pursuit were heard at the mouth of the gulch.

"Still on the track," Harper muttered.

"Boss," said Tubbs, touching his arm, "it's touch an' go now, fur our chances ain't big enough ter figger."

"Are you ready to fight if need be?"

"I reckon. Ben Tubbs ain't bashful."

They stood in the recess, which was broad and deep, each person by his or her horse, and ready to mount hurriedly and take to flight if necessary. The scene was impressive—the dark, frowning rocks, the horses and men in the recess, the girl, and, beyond in the gulch, the road-agents creeping slowly along.

Ben Tubbs frequently glanced behind them. The recess had not yet been fully explored, and he had so much faith in Captain Nevada's sagacity that he was ambitious to have a way of retreat ready for a critical moment.

He spoke to Sawtooth Sam and glided away. Five minutes later he returned.

"Thar's a thunderin' big hole in thar. I dunno whar it leads, fur I didn't hev time ter explore, but—"

"Easy," said Sam. "Hyar's ther critters!"

The road-agents were indeed at hand, and it did not require much wisdom to perceive that they were likely to carefully investigate the niche. They were making a thorough search, and the place of refuge would not go unnoticed.

As they came nearer, this probability became so nearly a certainty that, after a brief consultation, the fugitives retired into the deeper shadows.

"We've cut off all hope of sneakin' past 'em," said Sawtooth Sam, mournfully. "Things is all goin' wrong from eend ter eend. Now we shall be bottled up here an' kept ter dry."

His complaint passed unanswered. They had entered a place which was like a tunnel, and where they could see nothing in advance. The darkness was intense, but while Ben Tubbs led the way, Sam and Harper each took a side and they knew they were in a place of uniform width with a distance of forty feet from wall to wall.

They had not gone far when a shout arose from the entrance, but they could not well expect anything better. At times, despite all care, their horses' feet rung on the rocks, and outlaws could not very well have been deaf enough to fail to hear the sounds.

Harper spoke in a somewhat startled voice, but no one noticed him. Ben Tubbs had at that moment run against solid rock, and a little investigation showed him that a huge boulder blocked half of the passage.

"Halt!" he at once said. "We are now jest as good as diskivered, an' hyar's as don't run any funder. We kin stand at bay hyar, an' I'm durned ef we don't show some surprisin' teeth. Cap'n Nevada must stay back or git lead in chunks."

"That's ther size on't," added Sawtooth Sam. "Right hyar we pitch our tent an' shout fur ekul rights."

"It may as well be so," said Harper, addressing Gus, "but I am very sorry that I have brought you into this danger."

"Don't shed a tear," she answered, calmly. "I'm no child and I've seen trouble before to-day. We will make this our fort and show Nevada that he is not king of the mountain."

"Your bravery is sublime."

"Words are cheap; the real test comes by and by."

While they talked, Tubbs and Sam led the horses behind the boulder. It made an admirable shelter, being twenty feet across its face, and would serve as cover for the whole party. It might yet prove to be lacking in some essential features, but, just then, Harper, at least, did not look so far as that.

Meanwhile, a number of flashes of light near the entrance were followed by a steady light, and it was plain that the outlaws were about to prosecute a search with torches.

Having put all else in order, Sam and Tubbs drew near a common point for consultation. They ran their hands over their weapons to see that all was right and surveyed the dangerous signs at the front with evident disapproval.

Experienced as they were in such matters, it

needed no practical opening to show them that the affair would probably assume an ugly aspect. Nevada had plenty of men at his back, and he was one to press an enemy to the wall.

Despite this, there was no wavering in the little band. All were armed, revolvers being abundant, and all excepting Gus had rifles.

The road-agents came nearer. The party now visible numbered a dozen men, and the light from their torches fell upon their muscular forms with marked effect. No masqueraders were they, but outlaws of courage, and little or no conscience.

Ben Tubbs had gone to the front as the leader, and he did not give them a great deal of rope. His voice rung out suddenly and distinctly.

"Halt! Hold up thar, Cap'n Nevada, an' take your b'arin's. This claim is defended an' can't be jumped. Keep back or take lead. We shoot ter kill!"

The road agents had paused, but for a while no one seemed to be anxious to talk. Then a man pushed forward from the rear and the light of the torches fell upon the fair face and gaudy dress of Captain Nevada.

"Who is there?" he asked.

"Wal, I reckon we are hyar," said Tubbs, coolly. "Jest who we be you orter know, es you hev been chasin' us fur some time. Durn your ole hide, you are too neighborly."

"Aha! so I have you caged. You are in Gabriel's Horn, and mighty near the little end. You have chosen a fine hiding place, as I will soon show you. There ain't sand enough in your crowd to get out, but I'll show you I can get in."

"Don't you worry about this outfit," retorted Ben, viciously. "We drive our own kerriage, an' ef we see fit ter shove on ther brake, that's our funeral. As fur sand, we don't use ourn ter run, but ter fight. Now, ef ther inaugural is over, hear me howl. Ef you move a step this way, out goes yer eyes. We are hyer ter stay an'—ter shoot."

"Words are cheap. I am coming for you at once," said Nevada, coolly.

"That's right an' proper. Sail in whenever you feel ther speerit move yer; but, mind you, ther first bullet fired takes your life. I swear it."

"I'll bet my last ounce it don't."

With these words, the road-agent turned to his men and spoke a few words in a lower voice, after which the party spread out and prepared for a rush on the brave little band behind the boulder.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

CANYON DAVE ON THE TRAIL.

IT will be remembered that Canyon Dave, Brad Hackett and Judge Parmenter left Silver Spur shortly after the departure of Harper's party, with the intention of following wherever the San Francisco plotter led. They intended to make their following a close one, too, in order to protect Gus from possible harm.

Harper they knew to be a villain, and though Canyon Dave had some faith in Sawtooth Sam, all felt that he was not a man to be trusted.

Their plans went wrong almost at the beginning, however, they had not gone far on the trail when Canyon Dave's horse fell suddenly lame, and after some consultation all rode back to the village to obtain another.

By the time the fresh start was made, the first party was well on its way, but they proposed to cut down the lead by fast riding.

Consequently, they were soon moving over the road at a rapid pace, Brad Hackett at the head and the others close behind.

The former had relapsed into silence and rode with his eyes always strained to catch sight of any one at the front. He blamed himself already for having permitted Gus to go on so Quixotic an expedition. What to him was the future of the Browning fortune compared with that of his only child?

Canyon Dave was less gloomy, but it was because he had more faith. He loved Gus Hackett as well as brave old Brad could do, but his nature was more buoyant.

They went through the towering cliffs of the pass like a trio of wild huntmen, speeding along in a fashion which would have been ghost-like had not their horses' feet raised a tremendous clatter on the rocks underfoot.

Once Brad paused where a quantity of sand had collected on a level, and there, finding hoof-marks as he had hoped, they continued their gallop.

A mile beyond, another accumulation of sand was reached, and again Hackett sprung down.

Canyon Dave and Parmenter waited while he searched, with his face almost touching the sand. Anon, he raised his head abruptly.

"Who has matches?" he asked.

"I," answered Dave, producing them.

Brad used several of the brimstones, and then stood erect.

"Thar is summut hyar that I don't understand," he said slowly. "Thar has been trouble, I'll swar, but what it is I don't know. Other riders hev be'n hyar, an' I suspect mischief are afoot. Do ye s'pose they hev run outer Captain Nevada?"

The question was enough to bring Canyon

Dave out of his saddle, and he added his eyesight to Brad's. Truly, the little area of sand was peculiarly marked, and gave evidence of something unusual.

While they looked Parmenter kept his place on his horse, but it was because he was not skilled in the mysteries of the trail. He was anxious for the safety of 'Gus, and ready to do all in his power for her.

He was watching the other men when something caused him to turn his head, and then he grew amazed at seeing that a new-comer had appeared on the scene. Not five feet away, a tall man in a cloak and *sombrero* sat on a black horse, and seemed to be calmly watching the result of the trailers' search.

Parmenter uttered an instinctive exclamation, and his friends looked up. Both saw the last arrival, and one of the two recognized him at first glance.

The Incognito had again appeared.

Canyon Dave made two long strides, and then caught the unknown's horse by the bit, his impetuous haste and fierce grasp betraying the inward emotions which moved him, and then he hotly cried:

"Halt, sir! You are my prisoner!"

Incognito looked down at him without lifting a hand, and his face was covered by hat and cloak, as in the past, but the sneer which must have been on that face crept into his voice.

"I look like a man who meditates on flight, don't I?" he asked, with the utmost coolness. "I have ridden deliberately into your midst, unseen by any of you, and now you prate about flight. You are the modern Solomon."

His sneer confused and disturbed the mountaineer not a little, but the feeling soon passed as he remembered who and what was the man he now had in his power.

"Such words are empty," he said, "but one thing is sure. You are my prisoner, and I am going to fool with you no longer. You have chosen to act the role of a man of mystery, but it is time to unmask. Down off your horse and show your face!"

"Are you in earnest?"

"I am."

"Very well. I decline to obey."

"Then, by heaven," cried Canyon Dave, "I will use the strength I possess to force obedience. For the last time, down from your saddle!"

"And you insist on seeing my face?"

"I do."

"Mountaineer, in the moment when you unmask me, as you term it, you destroy the last hope of learning that secret, to know which you come to Silver Spur."

Incognito spoke in a thrilling voice, but Dave had lost all confidence in him.

"Bah! you can no longer use that lever. You do not know what you pretend; you are but a croaker. If I was an assassin, I would give you a bullet and throw you to the crows."

Dave spoke contemptuously, but the hiss which accompanied the retort almost startled him.

"Insolent dog, you have sealed your own fate. I will have your life for those words."

Brad Hackett now strode to the front.

"That'll do," he sharply said. "We've had enough cacklin'. Now, come down from whar you set or I'll give you a help that won't please yer!"

"Brute number two," said Incognito, sarcastically, "you have a very gentle way with guests, but in the midst of it all I have you at my mercy. I defy you, because I hold your hearts in the hollow of my hand. Wait. Lay one hand upon me and 'Gus Hackett is forever lost!"

The last words were spoken sharply, for Canyon Dave had raised his hand again, but they were efficacious. The mountaineer paused, while Brad Hackett suddenly pushed further forward.

"'Gus! 'Gus!" he uttered. "What can you tell us of her?"

"I can tell you where she is, and by what danger she is menaced, but if you are to tear me in pieces, I might as well die with my armor on and my secret untold."

"Empty talk!" said Canyon Dave. "'Gus is on her way to Ruggles's Bar."

"I'll swear to you that we are nearer there than she is," said Incognito, more earnestly. "You forget that Captain Nevada rides along this trail."

"Man," said Dave, anxiously, "is 'Gus Hackett his prisoner?"

"Ay, good master, and, mayhap, he will tear her in pieces as you are about to tear me!"

The unknown wrapped his cloak closer around his form, and his voice had a sneer in keeping with his exaggerated language. He was master of the situation and intended they should know it.

Canyon Dave, however, did not bend and fawn as he had hoped.

"Sir Incognito," he quietly said, "there is no love between us two. I will not here remind you how you have goaded me since I came to Silver Spur, but I think you can remember well enough to acknowledge that my recent words were natural. Be that as it may, you see here the

father of 'Gus Hackett, and for his sake, I ask you to tell us of the girl."

"Sol! No claim for yourself?"

"None. For the sake of Brad Hackett and his daughter I could almost kneel to you; but for myself, I shall never ask a favor. Your hold over me is broken, and whatever you may or may not know, you can keep to yourself."

Canyon Dave folded his arms, and his eyes blazed wrathfully. He longed to throw himself upon the mocking wretch before him, but prudence forbade. He believed it no idle boast when the unknown claimed to know something of 'Gus.

Brad Hackett hastened to make another plea, and Incognito suddenly stretched his arm out toward the north.

"The girl has gone from the trail, and if you would find her, you must search there. Haste, too, will do no harm, for Captain Nevada covets the same prize."

"Speak plainly, mister," urged Brad. "Is she a prisoner?"

"She was not when I last saw her; but I cannot answer for the present. Her party encountered the mountain robbers here, and were obliged to take to the hills. They showed a bold front, and may yet make Nevada trouble; but he had driven them to a hole in the rocks when I last looked on the scene."

"Fur ther Lord's sake, lead us thar!" said Brad, in a husky voice.

"Do this," said Parmenter, speaking for the first time, "and you shall be well paid."

The strange man laughed mockingly.

"Bah! Your money is like the sand under our feet, Lawrence Parmenter. I do not care a fig for it. Keep your pocket closed and your brain unlocked. Well, are you going to follow?"

He turned his horse's head toward the smaller gulch.

"Lead on," said Brad, quickly.

He leaped into his saddle, quickly imitated by Canyon Dave, and then all started at Incognito's heels.

The latter turned into the gulch and rode on steadily, his manner indicating that he was perfectly familiar with the ground they were treading.

"Kin he be trusted?" Brad asked, whispering to the mountaineer.

"For once I have a feeling that he can. Perhaps he has one soft spot in his villainous heart and will help 'Gus."

With these words Dave fell into the rear somewhat, where he rode with a cocked revolver in his hand, looking sharply to the right and left. If Incognito led them into any ambush, he intended to make his mark before crossing the divide.

And at the front, the unknown rode on without once turning his head.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE FIGHT IN GABRIEL'S HORN.

THE little band of fugitives who had turned at bay in Gabriel's Horn, could not very well avoid the fight that Captain Nevada was determined to force upon them. It must come sooner or later, and if they retreated further they were liable to meet the danger in a place not so well adapted to defense.

Consequently, they prepared to fight where they were.

"Get out your six, an' see that ther cartridges are all in persish," Sawtooth Sam said to Harper. "It is goin' ter be war to ther knife, an' bashfulness is a sin. When ther Philistines make their rush, hold up ther iron an' shoot early an' often."

"We have no light for aiming," said Harper, but his manner was cool and firm.

"Aim at ther crowd, an' trust ter luck. What are you goin' ter do, gal?"

'Gus had come out from behind the boulder.

"Fight!" she said, tersely.

"Lord! you mustn't!" Sam declared. "Why, a bit o' wild lead might hit you on healthy."

"Do I risk more than you?"

"Wal, I reckon you do. You are young an'—an' innocent; while I'm a hard rooster o' a bad name. Why, thar is them in Californy who would be glad to see Sawtooth Sam turn up his toes. I am tough, from heel ter scalp, but I've got a soft spot fur sech as you. Go behind ther rocks, gal."

"No," she said, firmly; "I am not a child, and I can use a revolver as well as any of you. Say, no more!"

He said no more, but it was because Ben Tubbs at that moment called to him. There were signs of a speedy charge on the part of the outlaws, and each one of the defenders sought a place to make the fight.

Ben Tubbs climbed high on the boulder and lay flat on the sloping side, his arms hanging over the highest part, and each hand grasping a revolver; Sam crouched on the floor at the boulder's edge, and Harper found a niche half way between them.

There was a sudden pattering of feet, and the road-agents sprang forward. They left their torches behind, not caring to increase the mortality pretty sure to ensue, but each man had a pair of revolvers and a knife.

It was Ben Tubbs who gave the word, and then Gabriel's Horn became filled with miniature thunder as six revolvers cracked again and again.

Six? Ay, six and more; for Sawtooth Sam suddenly became aware that 'Gus was beside him, and firing with machine-like steadiness.

The sight so startled him, that the knife he held between his teeth, ready for use, dropped to the ground; but this made little difference as matters resulted.

Captain Nevada's men were brave in cowering a stage party when money was to be won, but their reception in Gabriel's Horn was altogether too sultry for their courage. Some fell severely shot, and others, unhurt, stumbled over them; and almost before the defenders could hope for such a thing they saw the survivors in retreat.

They had won the first move in the game. Sawtooth Sam sprang up and seized 'Gus Hackett by the hand.

"Shoutin' sinners! how we sit!" he exclaimed, breaking into a shuffling dance. "You've got ther grit o' a Medoc chief. Harper, ole man, I'm proud o' ther outfit. We're pluck from ther heel, up."

He slapped his employer on the back and the whole party rejoiced, but Ben Tubbs soon took a practical turn of mind. He spoke to his companions and glided away toward the rear.

He was the most thoughtful man of the party, and he remembered that though one move in the game had been handsomely won it required hard work to keep at the head.

While he was gone the trio by the boulder watched the entrance. They could see the light of the outlaws' torches, which proved them still there, but they seemed in no haste to renew hostilities.

Thus, nearly half an hour drifted away.

Finally, Ben Tubbs returned, moving hastily, and at once made his report. He had explored the cave and discovered very clearly why it was called Gabriel's Horn.

Tunnel-shaped from mouth to rear, it gradually narrowed until it ended in solid rock; and in no place had he been able to find a place of exit.

"What shall we do?" Harper asked.

"Wal, I reckon we must bar it," said Sawtooth Sam, philosophically. "Always ther I wasn't borned ter run. We will fight!"

"They will beat us in the end," said Ben Tubbs, whose disposition seemed less sanguine. "We lack both water an' food, an' I reckon they kin take ther fort sooner or later on a squar' charge."

No one answered. The probability could not be very well disputed—the only wonder was that the first attack had failed—and something like gloom assailed each one.

Still, none of them felt like giving up in despair. Each one had plans and hopes for the future, and they were not made of ignoble clay.

It was Ben Tubbs who suddenly raised his hand.

"Bars up," he said, quietly. "Take it in."

"What?" Harper asked.

"Another charge, or I'm a sinner."

There could not be much doubt but what the redoubtable Ben was all that he insinuated, but even Harper could see that there was a stir among the road agents.

The defenders crept to their former stations and prepared for work, nor had they long to wait. There was a pattering of feet and the outlaws were again on the move.

Unlike the former charge, they did not come in silence. They whooped and yelled like Indians, growled like grizzly bears and screamed like panthers, making a medley so grotesque and, withal, so ridiculous on the face, that the defenders were astonished.

It seemed more like a stage burlesque than an attack with the worst of human passions as an incentive.

All this served to make the quartette more on the alert, however. They were puzzled and somewhat suspicious, but even that gave them no reason for neglecting self-preservation.

Again Ben Tubbs gave the word, and once more their revolvers began to play; but in the midst of all they had an unpleasant surprise.

The apparently absurd demonstration in front had an object—it was to cover another and more dangerous movement.

While the human menagerie played buffoon, other men were stealing, cat-like, on the brave defenders from the rear, their bare feet making no sound on the earth and rocks, their gaze fixed on the quartette by the boulder, their hands full of bristling weapons.

Thus it was that, just as active work began, each one of Harper's party was suddenly attacked from the rear, and as they bounded with a sudden realization of danger, a shrill whistle called the second party to the rescue.

At the end of ten minutes the road agents stood in a group, and an abundant supply of torches fell on a changed scene beside the boulder.

'Gus Hackett and her three masculine companions were prisoners. The girl herself had suffered no injury, for Captain Nevada had been

at a hand to protect her, but the men had played hard at the game of eyes and sales; and while the eyes had been playing, the hands had been working. Harper and his friends had been playing the game of eyes and sales, and the hands had been working. Harper and his friends had been playing the game of eyes and sales, and the hands had been working.

Harper was full of hot anger, Sawtooth Sam rather inclined to jest, and Ben Tubbs quiet almost to sullenness.

Ben had made the hardest fight of all, slashing about in a dangerous way with his keen knife, but it had been a useless effort, and he lay with the rest, his face covered with blood and dust.

Captain Nevada, as bland and neat of appearance as ever, went to the side of 'Gus.

"You see, my dear, that fate is on my side," he observed. "I marked you down as my property long ago, but some cursed chance baffled me; I don't know how it was done to this day. However, when I concluded to lay low, you ran into my hands like an innocent little bird into the jaws of a great, hideous serpent. Ah! do you see how frank I am, and how original is my comparison? Answer, fair Augusta."

"I dare say you are more skilled at decoying birds than warring against more dangerous creatures," she answered.

"Indeed! Do you see your friends bleed?"

"Yes; but I did not see you fighting them. I am under the impression that you kept out of the fight."

"Rest assured that I did, Augusta. My head has become too precious since I met you to risk it in a brawl. Ah! what now, Trueaxe?"

"The hosses are all ready fur departur', cap'n," the man returned.

"Then we will get up and dust. This has been a good night's work, and we won't lie longer in the pass. Hello!"

He had been looking at the prisoners, and his face suddenly lighted up at sight of Sawtooth Sam.

"Hello yourself!" returned that individual, coolly.

"Think I've seen you before, my good man."

"Well, I reckon I don't owe you anything."

"No; the shoe is on the other foot. We played poker in the Alexis saloon, and you was so impolite as to pull my beard from my face. Never mind; we'll soon square the account. Pick up these lumps of clay and tie them on their horses."

"Never mind ther last part," said Sam. "I ain't proud an' kin ride like common folks."

"You will go as I say," Nevada grimly announced; "and once at our quarters, I'll give you a taste of judgment. Up among the eagle nests we will hold the liveliest picnic on record."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CAMEL'S HUMP.

NONE of the men who followed Incognito had a great amount of faith in his good intentions. Who or what he was none of them knew, but they were willing to take some risk for the sake of 'Gus, while if he led them into an ambush at least two of the three would be quick to take revenge.

The unknown, however, seemed wholly at his ease and led on quietly for some time. At last he paused and seemed to listen.

"Do you hear anything unusual?" he asked, addressing Brad Hackett.

"Not a hear," replied the miner.

"I expected to find them near here. Just beyond us, on the left, is a place called Gabriel's Horn, a tunnel-shaped cave. In there Captain Nevada had the fugitives at bay, but I suspect he has captured them. This silence is too deep for a favorable interpretation. Now, we are four—who goes to explore the Horn?"

"I do," replied Brad, unwilling to trust their guide where they could not keep him revolver covered.

He asked for a description of the place and then went away. He returned at the end of fifteen minutes and his face bore an anxious look.

"Ther place is empty now, but thar has been fightin' thar. I see'd blood on ther rocks, an' it is fresh."

"Good heavens! the demons have accomplished their work!" said Parmenter, in a tone of horror.

"'Gus may yet be safe," said Canyon Dave, catching at a straw.

"She would be safer dead," said Brad, huskily.

"And you," said the mountaineer, turning to Incognito; "what have you to say?"

The man started, as though aroused from deep thought.

"I believe 'Gus Hackett is in the hands of Captain Nevada, and on her way to his lair amid the crags of Camel's Hump," he answered.

"She would be safer in the lair of a wolf. The road-agent has long coveted her, as you well know."

"Can you lead us to this lair?" Canyon Dave demanded.

"I can."

"And will you?"

"I will."

The mountaineer went forward and laid his hand on the unknown's arm.

"Sir," he said, "I told you a little while ago that, for the sake of 'Gus Hackett, I would kneel to you. Now, bearing in mind what she is and from whom we would save her, I ask you to tell me frankly, truthfully, if your offer is sincere or only the bait that leads to a trap."

Incognito hesitated before replying, and when he spoke his voice lacked the old, sneering inflection.

"It goes against me to aid one I hate as cordially as I do you, but 'Gus Hackett has won more hearts than she knows. For her sake, I will lead you straight and true."

His manner more than his words affected each one of the trio; for once they believed in what he said.

"Lead on," said Canyon Dave, simply.

He did lead the way—along the ridge to the base of Camel's Hump, and then upward where no horse could go. They left their animals in a ravine and pushed on, always up, up; and over chasms and rocks where a single false step would cause a fatal fall.

Judge Parmenter was weary before that tramp was ended, but Incognito seemed tireless and Brad and Dave were accustomed to such wild life.

The night was two-thirds gone when the guide paused in a gulch.

"Here we rest," he said.

"There must be no rest until 'Gus is found," Canyon Dave declared. "I dare not leave her through the coming day in the hands of Captain Nevada."

"Nor me," added Brad.

"Be calm," said the unknown. "You are altogether too hasty. You would not have me lead you boldly into the cave to face the thirty road-agents and die like bullocks in a pen, would you?"

"Not that, but my heart cries out fur my darter," said Brad, sighing. "Poor 'Gus! poor 'Gus!"

"Be calm!" repeated Incognito. "It falls to the lot of the lowly and despised to save her."

"How does it happen you so well know where their cave is?" Parmenter suspiciously asked.

"How do you know where your own house is?" was the quick retort. "Let me answer—because you have been there before. Enough of useless talk. The cave is not far away, and I will at once go to reconnoiter. Hope for success, but be prepared for failure. In this gulch, you have an excellent chance to secrete yourselves, and if you are wise you need not be discovered."

He waved his hand around him, and all silently admitted what he said. The center of the gulch was rough and rocky, but both slopes were covered with thick, short pines and, in many places, near the rocks which in places made low cliffs, with climbing vines.

Surely, there was room enough for hiding.

"Secrete yourselves in some place when I am gone," resumed the unknown, "and there await my return. When you hear the bark of a wolf, thrice sounded, answer, and I will soon be with you."

So no further words were said, and then Incognito climbed the bank and vanished from their sight in the darkness. Once, Canyon Dave took a step to secretly follow him, but he resisted the impulse and went with the others to the shadow of the pines.

There they lay and awaited the return of their ally, but the hours wore on and Incognito came not. They waited until the darkness shrunk sullenly away before the coming of the sun; and then daylight crept into the gulch and Old Sol kissed the highest peaks of Camel's Hump, but the unknown was still absent.

And then the conviction settled upon the trio that they had been deceived—perhaps, that the expedition to the Hump had been all a farce originated by Incognito to g in his liberty.

In thus thinking, however, they were mistaken, for Captain Nevada had borne his prisoners to a cave not half a mile away.

A wonderful retreat was this lair of the road-agent, spacious and convenient, and once there he consigned each captive to a proper place.

Soon after, one of his men came to him as he was striding toward his private room.

"Well, Trueaxe, what is it?"

"Beg yer parding fur interruptin', cap'n, but I kin put yer on track o' a lively secret ef you will listen ter me."

"Come to my room, then."

Trueaxe went—the reader has already recognized the man from Coyote Cliff—and in a little niche of the cave which Nevada had nicely fitted up for his own use, he sat down to tell what had been working in his brain all the way up the mountain.

"Cap'n, one o' them critters orter knowed me wal, but, somehow, he didn't. He has see'd me afore, an' I kin tell you summut about him."

"Which one is it?"

"Harper, is his name, Tom Harper, o' 'Frisco. That's whar he belongs. I'll tell you ther racket. Sixteen year ago, he stole a gal ter make a big stake in ther money line, but luck went dead ag'in' him, an' a few weeks ago he found his only hold fur ther fortune was ter pro-

duce ther heiress. Did he do it? Wal, he tried ter, but the heiress had swung around ther planet a bit, an' ther only clew Harper could get was that she was at Silver Spur. He found out dead sure that she was really one o' ther gals knowed as Jedge Parmenter's daughters, but which one he couldn't larn. He come ter Silver Spur ter find out."

"Well?"

"Wal, I reckon he has gi'n up ther game an' slung ther grappin'-irons at another craft, fur hyar we see him towin' 'Gus Hackett toward 'Frisco on ther jump."

"Very true, but what is all this to me?"

"Ain't ther a chance ter make a raise?"

"How?"

"Why, this hyar Harper gets plenty o' plums when he trots in his heiress; why can't you put yourself to ther fore, and take ther prize?"

"By Jupiter! there is something in this," Nevada acknowledged. "I think—"

He paused as another man suddenly strode into the apartment. This man presented a singular appearance. The fact that he was blood-stained was nothing new, but his blood-shot eyes and white face rather startled Nevada.

"Hollo, Miguel," he said, starting up, "what's the trouble? Haven't had an attack of—of anything fatal, have you?"

"I'm all right," sullenly answered the man, who was none other than Miguel Perez. "I have come to explain something."

"Blaze away."

"I have brought a prisoner to the cave."

"Aha! Who is he?"

"It isn't a man, at all. It's a woman, and one of Judge Parmenter's daughters."

"What?"

Miguel repeated what he had said.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" muttered Nevada.

"Why did you bring her?"

Perez glanced at Tom Trueaxe.

"Send him away and I will tell you."

Tom was dismissed, to return at some future period, and then Nevada went to one side and brought a flask of whisky to the Mexican. The latter had, however, dropped into a chair, and with his face buried in his hands, was shivering like a leaf in a gale.

"Come, man, brace up!" said Nevada, slapping him on the back. "You are sick, or something of the kind, but this stuff will put new life into you. Drink and be merry."

"Merry? I shall never be merry!" groaned Perez, flinging up his hands despairingly. "How can I think, or sleep, or eat, or drink, after this? I can see her still, the blood on her white hands, her face set and still, her life forever gone! But, I avenged her. Yes, I sprung upon the demon, bore him to the ground, and struck him so! and so!"

The wretched man had arisen to his feet, and with his bloodshot eyes fixed on vacancy, saw again that fearful tragedy in the timber, and at the close of his wild address, he made a motion as though driving home a knife.

His disordered clothing, his disheveled hair and his wild eyes clearly revealed the truth to Captain Nevada. He gently patted his mad follower on the shoulder.

"There, there!" he soothingly said, "think no more about it. Vengeance has been yours, and now all is well."

"I stabbed him five thousand times!" Perez asserted.

"You did right, perfectly right," said Nevada.

"But she is gone, forever gone!" and with these words the Mexican again sunk into a chair, and began to sob and moan.

Considerably perplexed, the captain went outside to question his men who had remained at the cave. They said that, an hour before, Perez had arrived at the place bearing a girl in his arms, she having fainted at the cave door. He had at the time seemed sane enough, but since then had half of the time been muttering and acting very strangely.

Nevada perceived that some terrible occurrence had unsettled his follower's mind. He went back to him and found him still sitting in the chair, but all his efforts to arouse him from his wandering mood proved unavailing.

Consequently, he administered a sleeping-powder which soon put his troubles temporarily aside, after which he was conveyed to a couch and comfortably arranged.

Returning from his really kind work, the outlaw chief encountered an old woman who acted as housekeeper for his wild band.

"Well, Judit," he said, "what is this I hear about a girl brought into the cave?"

"I have seen no girl," she answered, "nor do I care to see one. I hate women!"

"I know your charming disposition, Judit, but, to abandon the previous subject, since you say you know nothing about her, let me add that I have also brought a girl here."

"Are you mad?" she asked, harshly.

"Not yet, Judit. There, we will argue this case of whether 'tis best to love or hate, anon. All I care to say now is that the girl I have brought is to be my wife and the queen of the band. You must treat her with respect, to please me, Judit. Will you?"

"I suppose I can," was the surly reply.
"Enough said, then," added Nevada, laughing, and he passed on.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE CAPTIVES OF THE CAVE.

GUS HACKETT had been treated with unexpected gentleness during the journey up the mountain, but had she known that it was all done by the cunning Captain Nevada with a definite object in view, she would have been less grateful for his kindness in keeping away from her side.

Once in the cave, she was taken to a little chamber of rock which had been so well formed by nature that the addition of a door of pine had served to make a prison of passable security.

Left alone, she proceeded to make the best of her situation, and sat down in a rude chair to reflect.

In the first place, she was the captive of Nevada, and the fact that he had before attempted to abduct her was proof that he would hold fast to her; while Harper, Sawtooth Sam and Ben Tubbs, who, if not her friends, were, at least, her defenders, were in an equally bad plight.

There was, however, some hope of rescue. It had been arranged that Canyon Dave and her father should follow her from Silver Spur, and she had a good deal of faith in their skill and sagacity.

She would not despair while this hope remained.

In the midst of her reflections, the door opened, and a woman entered. She was old Judit, but as Gus had not before seen her, she now looked with interest.

All the bright days of the woman's life had gone past, but, though to all appearance sixty years of age, she was still erect and muscular of figure, while her face had a power, savage will and unfeeling expression which would have discouraged one who had less at stake.

Gus, however, only remembered that she was a woman, and that, on her own part, it was imperatively necessary that she escape at once.

Judit looked at her as though she was a horse on exhibition, and uttered a sound which was more of a grunt than anything else.

But Gus arose quickly and went to her side.

"Have you come to take me away?" she asked, with the most affecting smile she could summon.

"Um!" muttered the woman, staring at her as though astonished at the audacity of the question.

"Won't you be my friend?" continued Gus, determined not to be discouraged. "You are a woman, and you must feel for one of your sex who is in trouble."

"I don't care that for their troubles!" quoth Judit, snapping her fingers. "I hate women. It was a woman who made me an outcast and a beggar. Bah! I wish they were all in trouble, the deceitful wretches! I hate 'em, I hate 'em!"

And the speaker shut her teeth—they were as well preserved as her body—with a snap.

"But, if you have suffered wrong, you know how to pity others. I am a helpless girl, here through no fault of my own, and where you were when your enemy began to strike at you. Think of it! Surely, you will not see me wronged?"

"Won't I? Ha! ha! you don't know old Judit. I tell you I hate all women. I think you are the worst of all. You have a handsome face, and that is a sin. Wouldn't we make a bonny pair?—you so young and pretty, and I, so old and ugly."

With the last word the hag wrinkled her face until one feature seemed to roll over upon the other and only her eyes retained their cold, unfeeling glitter.

"Time marks the face, Judit, but the heart may still be young and—"

"Bah! you preach, and I hate preachers. I hate all women and I hate you; and I would tear out your eyes only good Captain Nevada says you are to be his bride. Ha! ha! ha!"

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed Gus.

"Preach! preach! preach!" sneered Judit. "Oh! I hate you royally. But, I remember—I came to see that you were comfortable. It's little I care whether you are or no, but good Captain Nevada would have it so. He is a man, and a nobleman, too; though he would never have brought you here if he had been in his right mind. But you are comfortable—oh! yes, too comfortable to please me."

The last words were uttered from the doorway, for Judit was in retreat, and amid her mutterings she closed the door and Gus was again alone.

She was disappointed at the result of her efforts, but it was not in her nature to be discouraged. If only time was given her, she felt sure that she could make an impression on Judit. Evidently, the woman was slightly deranged, and some wrong of her earlier years still rankled in her heart, but this very knowledge must be brought into use to soften her.

In the midst of such thoughts, the door again

opened and Captain Nevada entered. He had made a change of garments since his return to the cave and certainly looked remarkably handsome.

"I beg your pardon for intruding, Miss Hackett," he said, with a profound bow, "but when I say that I came for your own good, you will find it easy to forgive me, I think."

"Are you so anxious as that to oblige me?"

Gus asked, quickly.

"I really am, Miss Hackett."

"You can accomplish all by returning me to my home, sir."

"Ha! ha! You are quite facetious. Well, I'm not going to be mean about a small matter, and some day, after our wedding, we will run down to the Spur and see Brad and the boys."

He smiled as brightly as though he had really been a favored bridegroom-elect.

"If we wait for that time, we shall never go," said, Gus, defiantly.

"A mistaken notion of yours, my dear. Girls of your age frequently make mistakes."

"I would rather die than to become your wife."

"Can't we compromise the matter?" questioned the outlaw, thoughtfully. "I want to marry you, and you want to die. Now, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'm desperately in love, but love always dies young, you know. Consequently, if you'll be my wife, and the queen of the mountain eagles, for one year, you may then take poison and go home to Abraham in orthodox style. Is it a bargain?"

"No, sir; I will kill you before I will become your wife."

"Go away; you don't mean it."

It was impossible to disturb his even spirits, or to drive the smile from his face; but Gus, remembering the stories she had heard of his cruelty, knew that that smile was like Mephistopheles's, and shuddered even while he smiled.

He went away at last, and walked to where, in a sort of pit in the ground, partly natural and partly the work of the outlaws, Harper, Sawtooth Sam and Ben Tubbs lay bound hand and foot.

The air was damp and unwholesome, at the bottom of the place, but Nevada did not intend that they should suffer from its effects.

He thrust a torch into a crevice, and sitting down at the edge of the pit, looked down at them with his old, careless smile.

"Hallo, my Christian friends," he said, "how does the world move, down there?"

"Pears ter stand still jest at present," said Sawtooth Sam, promptly, "but we are waitin' fer it ter turn over an' spill us out."

"Your idea is bright and according to the laws of nature and art, but it may be you will be disappointed. T'm Harper, tell me why you were carrying off that girl, will you?"

"Not a word," answered Harper, defiantly. "I am in your power and I suppose you will use it without mercy, but you cannot make me divulge."

"I wouldn't give a snap of my fingers for your ante-mortem statement, you old idiot. I suppose you let your throbbing heart get the bulge on your gray head and hankered for a young wife, while the clink of your gold made Cupid pop up before her like a jack from a box. So let it be. I'll send you waltzing over the divide, and the fair 'Gus shall find consolation in the strong arms and tender heart of Captain Nevada."

"Oh! dry up!" interrupted Sawtooth Sam. "I'd rather hear a coyote howl than a man talk that way. Come down to solid facts."

"I will, my amiable Sawtooth, I will. Do you know what sort of a place you are in? That is what I call Death's wash-bowl. I'll show you why."

The outlaw went to one side, fumbled about the wall for a moment, and then, to the ears of the captives, came a sound like running water.

"Now," continued Nevada, "perhaps you see my little game. I have let on a stream of water which, in just one hour, will fill the pit to the top. It is ten feet deep, and though you stand on your toes, your heads will still lack four feet of being above water when it fills. You are bound hand and foot so that you cannot help yourselves, and the result will be that, at the end of the stated time, three drowned rats will float on the top of Death's wash-bowl. Do you catch the idea?"

"You are a fiend!" exclaimed Harper, whose feet were already dampened by the incoming water.

"That's about the size of it, Thomas. Well, this is an old way of mine, and as I know just how it works, I'll bid you good-day and call on the fair 'Gus. So long!"

Sawtooth Sam hurled a bold defiance after the receding outlaw; but the words brought no reply, and the trio found themselves alone.

"Great Peter!" said Sam, "this 'arth is gettin' moist. I reckon I will assume ther perpendickler."

All were of the same opinion, and after some twisting and squirming, they managed to stand erect.

At the further side of the pit the water was still falling steadily, and the depth of an inch already covered the bottom of the pit.

"I'm afraid we are doomed," said Harper, uneasily.

"Wal, ther outlook is durned jubous; I'm free ter admit that," said Sawtooth Sam.

Ben Tubbs said nothing, but wrestled with his bonds in a fierce fashion. There could be no doubt of Nevada's earnestness in this case, and Ben was not yet ready to die.

Still the water poured in, arising to their ankles, and they held an earnest consultation. It was wasted breath, for they were helpless as children. Their bonds could not be moved, nor could they climb from the pit; and when the water reached their mouths they must die, for they had no means of swimming.

At the end of half an hour the incoming flood touched their breasts. They stood close together, almost in despair, but still outwardly calm. The water as it fell into the pit was plainly heard, and its mellow music almost maddened them. It was dreadful to be so helpless in the midst of their strength.

Ben Tubbs called Sawtooth Sam aside.

"Sam," he said, "there may be such a thing as escape for you, even though I die. If it should happen so, will you do me a favor?"

"Yes—yes," muttered the other.

"Then go to Edna Parmenter and tell her how I died, and say my last thought was of her."

"I'll do it."

"And you, Sam?"

"Wal, what of me?"

"Is there no word you would leave—no one to whom I could go if the order is reversed?"

The miner swallowed once or twice before he answered.

"No," he finally said, "ther is nobody ter shed tears fur Sawtooth Sam. Ther might have been light fur me, but tar wasn't. I hope you'll live, though."

"You know my real name, Sam?"

"Oh, yes; Otis Sprague is it. Boyee, this move was powerful unlucky for us all. Harper loses ther gal, you an' me loses our lives, an' ther gal— Ah! boyee, I'm a tough ole rooster, but I shiver fur her."

"For her, I have some hope. Canyon Dave will not rest while she is in trouble."

Back to Silver Spur went the thoughts of the speaker, whom we now know to be Otis Sprague. He had disguised himself as Ben Tubbs and gone with Harper to watch over and guard Gus. He had done his best, but now, with death so near, he thought of that bright part of his own life.

"Edna! Edna!"

He breathed the words in one great sigh, but it was not cowardly fear which moved him so. A hero is not less noble because of a tender emotion in his life.

He was suddenly aroused as the water lapped his neck, while Harper, the shortest man in the party, broke out in wild cries. Thus far he had borne up bravely, but as the flood touched his under lip he could bear no more.

Only one small inch of life!

And the water dashed merrily down into the death-pit, the music mocking the helpless prisoners, and each moment bringing the death line nearer.

CHAPTER XL.

CANYON DAVE WALKS IN.

NEAR the southern side of the outlaws' cave a torch had been all the night thrust in a crevice, but it had burned low until only the stump and a glimmering coal remained. It no longer lighted the passage plainly, though a dull gleam was shed for a few feet around.

The place seemed deserted. No sound arose near at hand, and nearly all of the road-agents were sleeping in another part of the cave.

Suddenly, however, a dark form appeared in the dim light, flitted past, and then dropped flat on the floor where the shadows were deeper, all of which went to show that some one desired to escape observation.

This person was Canyon Dave. He had at last grown tired of waiting in the gulch where Incognito had left him, and so he had pushed on and, by chance, discovered the entrance to the cave; though the only proof he had yet received of the fact was embraced in the dying torch.

Where torches burn, people must surely be, and it was not likely there were other dwellers on Camel's Hump than the Nevada outlaws.

Beyond the light he paused to listen, and then, arising, went slowly forward, knife and revolver ready for use.

Not far had he gone, however, when a man crossed the passage just in front of him, moving through one running at right angles with the first.

Canyon Dave remained unseen, and then, after a pause, he himself turned and followed at the heels of the unknown, keeping at a respectful distance.

By and by the pursued paused before some sort of a door and began removing the bars that secured it. The movement brought his face into plain view and the mountaineer started.

The man was Miguel Perez.

The discovery itself did not surprise Dave,

for he had suspected his connection with the band before that night, but a great change seemed to have taken place in the Mexican.

His clothing was in disorder, his hair stood out like bristles, his face was deathly pale, and in his eyes was a wild gleam which the observer could not understand.

The view was but brief, however, for Miguel threw open the door and passed inside.

A suspicion had crossed Dave's mind and he strode forward, resolved to know what was in that room. Luckily, Miguel left the door ajar, and looking through, the mountaineer saw, not Gus, but Edna Parmenter.

The girl had arisen from a chair, in sudden alarm, and as she looked at Miguel's wild face, the color gradually receded from her cheeks until her pallor rivaled his own.

She was in dangerous company, for since the hour when Miguel saw Persi Ripley lying dead at his feet, he had been a veritable madman. At times he became calm of manner and showed his condition only in his personal appearance; but the madness was always there, eating away his brain and life.

It had been a mad freak when, after Persi had been so avenged by the death of Carter, he resolved to abduct Edna, but the work had been performed with great skill and cunning.

Now, once more face to face with his captive, he burst into a wild laugh.

"H! hal my bonny bride, we meet now to part no more. What fate has created for each other shall be one in life and death. Hal! hal! we will make a brave pair, you and I! I am the king of the air, and you shall be queen of the clouds. We will sail away from the top of a high peak—away, away, like a mountain eagle. We will bask in the kiss of the sun and catch the lightning bolt in our naked hands. The rolling thunder shall be our drum, and we will march, march, from planet to planet. Hal! hal!"

He flung up his arms in imitation of the flapping of wings, but Edna could only stand, pale and silent, and stare at the ominous appearance he presented. No one could doubt his insanity.

"Come," he continued, "let us no longer delay. The nymphs of the air await our coming and we will join them without delay. From this peak we start, and we will sail away through the blue skies as free as the birds of the air."

He started forward, but Edna sunk upon her knees.

"Oh! mercy! mercy!" she gasped. "In Heaven's name, spare me!"

The madman answered with a wild laugh, and extended his arms to seize her, but at that moment Canyon Dave sprung upon him. The mountaineer had heard and seen all, and at the critical moment he made the attack.

He skillfully tripped the Mexican and bore him to the floor, but the victory was not yet won. The maniac put forth all his power and nearly escaped the hold, and in a moment more they were rolling over and over on the floor.

Edna remained with clasped hands, watching them for a moment, but she was not of the order of human beings who believe in the efficacy of mere words; she believed that deeds counted more than anything else, and she caught up Canyon Dave's revolver, which had fallen from his belt, and watched for a chance to put it in his hand.

The chance soon came; he seized and used it as a club, and after a few blows Miguel rolled over insensible.

The mountaineer, panting from his exercise, looked about and saw some cords, and at his request Edna brought them and they were speedily used on the limbs of the unconscious madman.

Canyon Dave stood erect, and Edna caught his hands and uttered her thanks.

"Have you seen 'Gus'?" was Dave's first question.

"No. Is she here?"

"She should be, but all is uncertain. Nothing surprises me more than to see you. How does it happen you are here?"

Edna told how she had been captured—a story which need not be given here in detail. Suffice it to say that Miguel, flying from the scene of Persi Ripley's death, had chanced upon Miss Parmenter outside her father's house and had borne her to the cave.

During the journey she had been well treated, though he had at times talked wildly, but only the mountaineer's timely coming had saved her at the end.

"Gus is here," said Dave, as she concluded, "and I must find her; but I will first lead you to the cave entrance and direct you to Judge Parmenter and Brad Hackett. They will protect you."

The speaker hastened to retrace his steps, and, once outside the outlaws' den, he showed Edna where her other friends were concealed in the pines; then, as she went away, he turned and went back into the cave.

He must find 'Gus' if she was alive.

This time he took the passage through which Miguel had come when on his way to the prison of Edna Parmenter, feeling confident that it would lead to the interior of the place.

He had not gone far, however, before a strange sound was borne to his ears. It was much like the low-drawn howl of a bound, but after listening for a while Dave made allowance for the nature of the subterranean abode, and pushed on.

The sound increased in volume as he advanced, and he was not long in deciding that some human being was crying for help.

One moment he hesitated, but he remembered that, according to his theory, Otis Sprague, alias Ben Tubbs, and his companions, should be in the cave if alive, and he increased his pace to a quick trot.

Turning a point of a rock, a strange scene lay before him. A brightly-burning torch threw out its light on a square pit in the ground—the "Death's wash-bowl" of Captain Nevada—from which came these cries.

Greatly astonished, Canyon Dave advanced and saw the bubbling water, and, as though floating on the surface, three human heads.

These heads, however, gave signs of life, and from one of the three lusty cries were proceeding.

Poor Harper, however, dipped water every time he opened his mouth, and nothing but his fearful danger kept his voice in anything like decent condition.

One of the silent men was using his eyes more than his lungs, however, and his face suddenly brightened.

"Dave! Dave!" he cried, "for God's sake save us!"

The mountaineer started. His name had been called, but in an unnatural voice, while the light was not sufficient for him to recognize any of the three.

While he advanced to the edge of the pit he was in turn observed by a man in the background, who had for some time been watching the men in the water.

This person was Tom Trueaxe, and he had laughed immoderately over Harper's distress. Those frantic cries were music to his depraved ears.

Now, however, the appearance of Canyon Dave on the scene put a new face upon the matter, and he looked with fresh interest. His stay at Silver Spur had been so brief that he now failed to recognize the mountaineer, but he suspected that he was not of the band.

"What sort of a performance is this, and who are you?" asked Dave, as he looked down on the gasping three.

"Don't you know me? I am Otis Sprague."

Dave uttered an exclamation of surprise, and prostrated himself to act the rescuer, while at the same moment, unseen by any one, Tom Trueaxe glided toward him.

"Quick! quick!" gurgled Harper.

Canyon Dave seized Sprague by the collar and began lifting him from the pit, but at that moment the creeping outlaw hurled himself squarely upon the mountaineer's back.

CHAPTER XLI.

IN WHICH CAPTAIN NEVADA PLAYS HIS BEST CARDS.

THE attack of the outlaw was wholly unexpected, but Canyon Dave was not a man to be easily subdued. He realized his danger, even before he turned his head, but his first effort was a still stronger pull at Sprague's collar. One great effort, and his partner lay high upon the rock, but, unluckily, still bound.

"Hold up, right there!" said Tom Trueaxe. "My revolver is at your head—"

His words were thrown away, for Canyon Dave felt the touch of the weapon, but even that did not alarm him. Quick as a flash he reached over his shoulder and seized the dangerous toy, and then somehow—Trueaxe did not exactly recognize how it was done—he whirled over upon his back and faced his enemy.

The outlaw was confused by all this, for he had not thought such a thing possible, and before he could recover his wits he was fairly in Dave's grasp and overturned.

Then began the real struggle, for Tom was strong and resolute, and though Dave clung to his throat and prevented any outcry, he found his work so difficult that he determined to end it.

Out from his belt he drew his knife, and then, as he made a quick, sure lunge, Trueaxe's grasp suddenly loosened, and he lay motionless, and to all appearances, lifeless on the floor.

As the mountaineer staggered to his feet, Sprague spoke quickly.

"The other men—save them, Dave; they are drowning!"

There was indeed a tremendous thrashing from the pit, for Harper was in the grasp of the flood; but one strong pull landed him on the rock, and Sawtooth Sam was soon placed beside him.

Canyon Dave cut the bonds of the three, and Sprague and Sam sat erect, but Harper lay prostrate and breathed stertorously.

"Et's mighty good ter git ashore," said Sam, who seemed proof against all gloomy inclinations.

"Sprague, old fellow, how is it?" the rescuer anxiously asked.

"All right, now, but it was a close call. Five

minutes more and we would have been beyond help."

"If our legs had b'en longer, our pluck would hev been stronger," observed Sawtooth Sam, poetically.

"But how came you in such a predicament?" "All through Captain Nevada's way of doing business. He sends his victims over the divide in a fashion more romantic than pleasant."

While Sprague spoke, Sam moved to Harper's side and shook him soundly.

"Wake up, old man, wake up!" he said; but Harper failed to respond to the call, and Sam looked at Dave and anxiously added: "By ther Eternal, I'm afeared he has got his last drink."

"Let be so; he is not worth much trouble," was the indifferent reply.

"He must be saved!" Sam declared. "We don't want our family circle broke up this way. Get a stomach-pump or a 'metic."

Before any one could answer, footsteps sounded and Edna, Brad Hackett and Parmenter appeared.

"Gus! 'Gus!" muttered the miner, after a glance at the group before him. "Whar is my leetle gal?"

"True, true," said Canyon Dave. "I am letting valuable time slip past unheeded. 'Gus' Hackett must now be saved, and as we are strong in numbers, we can work more boldly."

Tom Trueaxe suddenly opened his eyes.

"Promise ter spar' my life," he faintly said, "an' I'll tell you whar she is."

Canyon Dave turned on him in surprise. He had believed the man past earthly troubles, but the voice was still tinged with earthly strength and fears. In his face, however, the mountaineer saw the signs of speedy dissolution.

"I promise," he quickly said. "No man hero shall harm you."

Tom gave the necessary directions, and then Dave called on his company to follow him. Brad, Sprague, Parmenter and Edna obeyed, but Sawtooth Sam still hovered over Harper.

When the others were gone he began to roll him over and over, and his efforts were soon rewarded by a rush of water from Harper's mouth.

Convinced that he would speedily recover, Sam began to wring the water from his own clothing, and he was soon so busily engaged that he did not see Tom Trueaxe draw a revolver from his belt and level it at the man from San Francisco.

Deadly aim he took, and Harper's life seemed hovering on the verge between the known and unknown shores. He pressed the trigger, but no sound followed. He had forgotten to raise the hammer.

It is, however, he proceeded to do, but the click aroused Sawtooth Sam, who sprung forward and seized his arm.

"Wretch!" he cried, "what would yer do?"

"Kill him!" was the sullen reply. "Oh! let me have one shot at him! I hate him so, and he is as big a villain as breathes free air."

"What do you know about him?"

"Enough ter send him ter prison. Is child-stealin' a crime? Wal, I reckon 'tis, an' I could bottle Tom Harper up."

Sam looked at him earnestly.

"See yer," he said, quickly. "Thar is them that want a secret o' child-stealin' from Harper's lips. What kin you tell?"

"I kin tell how he stole a child sixteen year ago ter make a money raise, an' how fur all this time he has paid me ter keep ther secret. Oh! I know Tom Harper, from hoof ter sculp, an' I say he is a bad one."

Before anything more could be said, Canyon Dave and his party returned, with 'Gus' Hackett in their midst. Sprague and Edna walked arm in arm, and Parmenter uttered no reproach, while Brad Hackett hovered over his daughter.

There was a settled purpose visible on the face of the mountaineer, and he at once went to Harper's side.

"It only remains to make this man speak, and then our work is done," he said, looking at Sawtooth Sam's patient.

"Let me speak for him!"

The words arose at one side, but when the startled party looked for the speaker, he was invisible. A little beyond, however, was a startling sight. A dozen of the outlaws stood in a line, each man with a rifle at his shoulder and the muzzles covering our friends.

"You perceive th t I have the drop," continued the same voice, "and now I will show myself. If one of you raise a weapon, my men will fire. Bear this in mind and be wise."

Captain Nevada stepped from a niche and bowed mockingly.

"It gives me great pleasure to meet so many old friends on this joyous occasion," he said, in his usual manner. "I did not expect to be called upon to make a speech, but I want to say in good, square English, that you are all welcome to my home among the crags, and if I don't make matters hot for you, I am a liar!"

While the outlaw used his tongue, Canyon Dave was otherwise busy. He saw that Nevada had them completely at his mercy, and that he would not show any of that divine article in his management of the situation.

He, however, saw one faint hope of relief.

The scene was lighted by two torches which were thrust into crevices at a point half-way between the rival parties. If these torches were extinguished, there would be a small hope of escape.

But how was it to be done?

The mountaineer resolved to try an experiment. He was a skillful revolver shot, and had often snuffed candles with bullets; and it occurred to him that if the torches were not too firmly secured in the crevices, he might now plunge the place into almost total darkness.

It was worth trying.

Up went his weapon suddenly and two shots were fired in quick succession, and in both cases the torches leaped from the crevices, but no one was prepared for what followed.

As one of them touched the rock, a bright flash leaped up and around, and then followed a roar and a crash which shook the whole cave and prostrated the little party by the pit.

Canyon Dave was nearly stunned, but he retained his mind sufficiently to understand that an explosion of powder had taken place. The air was full of smoke and dust and total darkness reigned all around.

It was not a time for inaction, however, and he crept to the nearest torch, which faintly glowing, and hastened to fan it into a blaze. No one appeared to molest him.

He looked first of all at the quarter where the outlaws had stood, but they were no longer visible. In their place lay a mighty boulder which completely filled the passage, and he knew they were either crushed beneath it or walled away on the other side.

He turned away and stumbled over something; he looked down and saw the lifeless and mangled form of Captain Nevada. He had lost the battle in what seemed to be the movement of victory.

Then the mountaineer turned to his friends. They were all on their feet, and though badly shaken up, were one and all without serious injury.

At this moment, however, a woman came running toward them, unconscious that they were not road agents, and a sudden opening and closing of their ranks, made old Judit a close prisoner.

She stared at them, dumb with surprise, but, suddenly, Tom Trueaxe lifted himself on his elbow and pointed at her with one quivering hand while strange mutterings and excited looks announced some unexpected discovery.

CHAPTER XLII.

A SERIES OF REVELATIONS.

BEFORE Tom Trueaxe could explain the cause of his emotion there was a wild howl on the other side of the group, and Miguel Perez bounded toward them with a terrible look on his face.

Canyon Dave comprehended that his mad companion in a former battle had in some manner broken his bonds and prepared to meet him. He stepped forward and tripped him, and in a moment more, aided by Sprague, had him under control.

The mountaineer held his knife at his throat. "Be still or I strike!" he warned.

But Edna sprang forward.

"Spare him!" she said. "He is mad and does not know what he is doing. Tie him, if you will, but do not harm him."

"He is the biggest villain unhung," Sprague protested.

"But you will spare him for my sake?"

"Bring on the strings and tie him up," said Otis, his face brightening. "We will not harm him."

During this time Canyon Dave had not been blind to other matters. He saw Brad and Sawtooth Sam holding Judit, who wildly struggled to reach Miguel's side, and he stepped forward and touched her arm.

"At last," he said, "I know you as you are, and I perceive that Incognito is a woman!"

Judit had grown calm as soon as she saw that Perez was not to be harmed. She now looked calmly at the mountaineer.

"Your eyesight comes to you very late in the game," she sneered.

"I have been blind, but you will remember that you always concealed your face. You do not deny that you are Incognito?"

"Even now you are doubtful. Well, let it pass; I am Incognito, the person who summoned you to Silver Spur, and who can name your sister."

"Tell me! tell me!" uttered Canyon Dave, his voice shaking.

"I will, if you will swear that I shall go free with yonder man."

Judit, alias Incognito, pointed to Perez.

"What is he to you?"

"My son."

"Aha!"

"Yes, my son. Come, David Canton, do you give the pledge? I will be as faithful as yourself."

"You and Perez shall go free; I swear it."

"Then look on your sister!"

The old woman pointed to Edna Parmenter.

"She, my sister!" echoed the mountaineer.

"Ay, and why not? Listen to me, David Canton! Twenty years ago I was a widow with one child, Miguel. I met your father and tried to win his love, but he turned from me and married Ruth Ebridge. That blow ruined my life, and made me a wanderer on the face of the earth, but I had my revenge. I stole the baby girl born of that marriage—your half-sister, for you were the child of Morris Canton's first marriage—and no trace of it could be found. A few weeks ago I called you from the pleasures of the hunt, saying that you could find your sister at Silver Spur, but I did not intend to tell you. Instead, I had a sweet revenge in mind—I hoped to wed you to Edna Parmenter, your own sister. My plans, however, failed, for I could direct the love of neither of you. Oh! I have hated you both, but when the girl lifted her voice for Miguel, my son, just now, I resolved to tell all. Edna is your sister!"

"What proof can you give of this?" Canyon Dave asked, in bewilderment.

"Ask Parmenter if he did not find her on his doorstep, sixteen years ago, and look for yourself to see if there is not a star-shaped mark on her arm, the brand I put there so long ago."

"It is there!" said Edna, faintly.

"I say it is all a lie!" faintly uttered Tom Trueaxe, who had not failed to listen. "There gal is a 'Frisco heiress, an' her name is Miriam Browning. I kin prove it, too. Why, I've knowed this woman fur years. Call her what you will, she was onc't knowed as Huldah, an' she stole ther darter o' Silas Browning, o' 'Frisco, ter please Tom Harper. Ther gal she stole is that same Edna Parmenter!"

"So you have chipped in, my bold Tom," quoth Judit, serenely. "You mean well, but you don't know. I've fooled you, the same as I have everybody else. Still, I am Huldah, Judit, Incognito, and Manuela Perez, all in one. As for you, you are a cur who stood by and gnawed the bones which fell from Thomas Harper's table."

"I say you stole Miriam Browning," persisted Trueaxe.

"So I did, but I didn't give her to Parmenter. No, that babe was left in the care of Brad Hackett, sixteen years ago. Do you deny it, old man?"

Brad wiped his forehead, and his voice was husky as he answered:

"I reckon it may be as you say. Somebody, an' I guess it war you, presented me with a babby at ther time you say; but I never knowed whar it sprung from."

"Have you still the clothes which were upon it?"

"Ev'ry rag," sighed Hackett.

"Then there is ample proof there. I tell you all that this girl, known as 'Gus Hackett, is really Miriam Browning, of San Francisco. I stole her sixteen years ago, to oblige Thomas Harper, who hoped to make money out of the act. He has been steadily bled all these years by Tom Trueaxe, so on the whole I think the bold Tom had better subside!"

And Tom subsided accordingly.

Meanwhile, Harper still lay insensible, and 'Gus and Edna shed tears in each other's arms. Neither seemed to take the revelations kindly, though it was not hard to guess, from the looks Canyon Dave and Otis Sprague occasionally cast their way that they would manage to find consolation.

"As for you, young man," continued Judit, turning to the mountaineer, "a few more words of explanation may be necessary. In my intercourse with you at Silver Spur, I have been actuated by two emotions—hatred for you and your sister, and actual regard for the girl called 'Gus Hackett. The last was the one bright spot in my later life. I hoped to marry you to Edna, and was as anxious to keep 'Gus away from you. That is why I tried to make her think you came to the Spur in search of an old lady-love."

"I see."

"You have some cause to thank me, young man. I led you to Brad Hackett's door one night when I knew Nevada was about to attack, and I sounded the warning by hurling a stone against the door. You will remember it. As for Eldorado Eph, he never knew aught of your sister; the girl he knew about was Miriam Browning, for he had been Tom Trueaxe's partner. Eph joined Nevada's men, and that was why I saved him from your hands one night, and then saved you from him after I had struck you senseless."

"Perhaps you can tell who killed Eldorado Eph, on the ledge," said Dave, in bewilderment.

"That was my work. Eph became dangerous; and, to save 'Gus, I killed him and drugged Lasso Leon and Captain Nevada. When you looked for the latter, I had dragged him away out of sight."

"Is there anything more?" muttered the mountaineer.

"Well, yes; it was I who wrote the letters to Judge Parmenter and Edna, revealing the fact that the latter was not Parmenter's daughter, and signing Sprague's name. It was a plot to separate them, so that I could marry Edna to you. Now, I've told the whole and I'll go, but

I bid 'Gus Hackett, whose real name is Miriam Browning, to beware of Thomas Harper."

"I'll look out for her, if you please," said a new voice; and Sawtooth Sam stepped to the front.

"You!"

"Yes, I. You see, 'Gus is a little related to me, for I am Silas Browning!"

With these words he cast off a wig, and when he had washed in the water of the pit, a false beard and a good deal of tan followed suit.

Sawtooth Sam was really metamorphosed into Silas Browning.

"I am a man commonly considered as dead, and I have an elegant tombstone near San Francisco, but I still live. My daughter, Miriam, was stolen when a babe, but it took many long years for me to suspect Thomas Harper. When I did, aided by my family physician, I laid a trap for Harper. I pretended to die, and the will I left was an incentive to Harper to find the child. As I suspected, it was he who caused her abduction. Well, I followed him, disguised as Sawtooth Sam, and often in consultation with Cleon, my faithful negro servant. Both he and I have had some narrow escapes. Once he heard Harper hire Tom Trueaxe to kill him—Cleon—and only that I wrote Trueaxe a letter warning him out of town, he would have tried it."

"So I would," acknowledged that man, "but my villainy is about over. My life is going fast."

"Harper was off the trail when I arrived at Silver Spur, so, of course, I obtained no clew," continued Browning; "but I was drawn to 'Gus Hackett. I helped her now and then, and I was glad when Canyon Dave showed enough confidence in me to ask me to be one of her protectors to Ruggles's Bar. Thomas Harper thought he was putting a false heiress in the field then, but, by a strange chance, he selected the real one."

"Well," said Huldah, alias Judit, "if all this explanation and whining is done, I reckon I will go. Circumstances have made me tell secrets I intended to carry to my grave; but it may be as well."

They released Miguel Perez, who had grown quiet, and he seemed willing to go, but his eyes lacked the light of reason.

"Come, mother, come," he said, as Judit paused at the door and looked back. "We will go to the top of the highest cliff and sail away, away, in the air, where the thunder rattles beneath us, and the forked lightning plays with the clouds. Come!"

The strange pair went out, but their journey was short. Going down the mountain a little later, our friends came upon two bodies which lay mangled at the foot of a cliff. They were those of Huldah and Miguel Perez, and it was not hard to comprehend how they had met their fate. The madman had tested his theory of sailing away in the air, and had taken his mother with him in the death-leap.

Let us pass over the work of welding the reunited links, and, with a glance at the result, end our story.

Tom Trueaxe died in the cave, and Harper followed him to the dark river in a few days, though not until he had fully confessed. His experience in the pit proved a fatal one.

When Silas Browning returned to San Francisco he was accompanied by 'Gus, Edna, Canyon Dave and Sprague, and a double wedding soon followed. Cleon was among those present, for of course "Sawtooth Sam" had sent him home when he made Harper believe he had murdered him.

Browning was always proud of his success in playing the part of the rough miner, but he had been greatly helped by his experience in early life, which had been rough and adventurous, and he had deceived all.

On the whole, his scheme had been a great success, and he liberally rewarded his physician and Cleon.

Parmenter missed Edna, but found consolation in Helen and Millicent; but Brad Hackett abandoned mining and settled in San Francisco, where he could always be near 'Gus.

The Cantons and the Spragues still reside in the metropolis of the Pacific, and their lives have been peaceful and happy ever since the day when they bade farewell to Silver Spur.

THE END.

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